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Eight Rights Activists Killed Last Year in Guatemala

by Louisa Reynolds

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One of the most high-profile human rights killings in Guatemala during the past year was the abduction of sociologist Emilia Quan, who was found dead last December.

"Happy, jovial, creative, and intelligent" is how co-workers describe 33-year-old sociologist Emilia Margarita Quan Stackmann, who was found dead on Dec. 8, 2010, in an area known as La Cruz de Canalix, between the municipalities of Chiantla and San Juan Ixcoy, in the northern department of Huehuetenango.

Quan had worked for the Centro de Estudios y Documentación de la Frontera Occidental de Guatemala (CEDFOG) for five months when she was kidnapped together with her driver Víctor Manuel Palacios on Dec. 7.

A report by the Juzgado de Paz, in the municipality of Barillas, said Quan and her driver were travelling in a Toyota Land Cruiser when they were stopped at 7 a.m. by armed men between the village of Paquix, Chiantla, and San Juan Ixcoy.

Palacios was later found alive—beaten and with his hands tied behind his back—close to Quan’s body. He says that two heavily armed men got into the car and abducted them without giving any details on why they were being kidnapped.

As soon as the kidnapping was reported to the Policía Nacional Civil (PNC), a roadblock was set up in an area known as La Blockera, at the entrance to Barillas.

At 11:30 a.m., the police stopped a vehicle with the same characteristics as the one in which Quan was reportedly travelling. Two men were forced to step out: 36-year-old Evelio Arístides Rivas, who was arrested, and 18-year-old Jorge Hernán López, who managed to escape.

Both men came from the departmental capital of Huehuetenango, and Rivas had a criminal record that included grievous bodily harm, drug trafficking, illegal possession of firearms, and property damage.

López was later detained in Barillas and transferred to the municipality of Santa Eulalia because of fear that locals would attempt to lynch him, as word of Quan’s abduction had already spread like wildfire. However, these efforts proved futile, as a furious mob of around 2,500 villagers stopped the police vehicle, forced the helpless agents to hand him over, and then set him on fire.

Three hours later, the mob, armed with machetes and sticks, gathered in front of the Barillas police station, where Rivas was detained, dragged him out, and lynched him.

To date, the Huehuetenango police insist that Quan’s abductors were trying to steal the Land Cruiser, not to kidnap Quan. "This wasn’t a kidnapping. The motive was to steal the car and leave Quan and her driver somewhere, but she resisted and tried to jump out of the vehicle," said a police spokesperson.
López’s police statement supports this theory, and an autopsy by the Instituto Nacional de Ciencias Forenses (INACIF) revealed that Quan died from multiple head injuries suffered as she fell out of the vehicle.

However, many social organizations, including Acción Ciudadana, the Guatemalan chapter of Transparency International (TI), have called for a thorough investigation to establish whether Quan’s abduction was related to CEDFOG’s work, as in June 2010 the organization published a report detailing numerous examples of corruption in local infrastructure projects as part of a citizen-participation-and-accountability project.

One of the main reasons local activists suspect that Quan’s abduction was politically motivated is that, an hour and a half after Quan and her driver were carjacked, Manuel Méndez, an accountant for the Catholic nongovernmental organization (NGO) Pastoral Social de Huehuetenango, was abducted in exactly the same way as he was travelling in a Land Cruiser almost identical to Quan’s. He was released hours later in the El Naranjo neighborhood of Huehuetenango with his hands tied behind his back in the same way that Quan’s driver was found.

The Pastoral Social de Huehuetenango had worked with CEDFOG on a number of investigations on transparency, accountability, and the oral traditions of the region’s Mayan Mam communities.

"The Pastoral Social’s vehicle was a 1989 Land Cruiser, and ours was a 1998 Land Cruiser. Why would a criminal organization want two old vehicles, and why did the two abductions occur almost simultaneously?" asked María Concepción Sáenz, director of CEDFOG.

"That two Huehuetenango organizations with a similar focus on development, transparency, and accountability—the Pastoral Social and CEDFOG—were attacked indicates that a common crime, such as the theft of a vehicle, could have been used to cover up a political motive," said Claudia Samayoa, director of the Unidad de Protección a Defensores y Defensoras de Derechos Humanos Guatemala (UDEFEGUA).

**Eight activists killed in 2010**

Emilia Quan’s death shook Guatemala’s academic and NGO communities to the core as she was a well-known researcher who had worked for the UN and the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), among other organizations.

UDEFEGUA said that, last year, eight human rights defenders (a category that includes human rights, labor, and women’s rights, as well as indigenous activists, environmentalists, and researchers) were killed in Guatemala, and there were a total of 304 acts of aggression against various types of activists.

The activists killed include labor unionists Pedro Antonio García, Octavio Roblero, and Evelinda Ramírez, sociologist Emilia Quan, local development promoter Santos Cruz Nájera, and environmentalist Samuel Rodríguez Reyes.

Amid a surge in violence against women, with over 800 femicide cases reported last year, women’s rights activists have been the worst affected regarding aggressions (a total of 101 cases were reported in 2010), which includes threats and raids on organizations’ headquarters.

One of the organizations targeted was Fundación Sobrevivientes, which provides legal assistance to rape and domestic-violence victims.
Other types of activists attacked last year include local development promoters, labor unionists, and journalists. Samayoa said the attacks on development activists and labor unionists are linked to organized crime, which works its way into local government structures and feels threatened by activists who report corruption.

In 2009, the number of aggressions reported against activists was higher (322), but the violence and viciousness of the attacks was greater in 2010, which is "a very worrying trend," said Samayoa.

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