

[European bishops visit Guatemala mine site, hear protest testimonies](#)

A delegation of four European bishops visiting Guatemala have heard testimonies of police violence against a peaceful protest camp, evicted in May 2014. The bishops are visiting Guatemala to support and to give testimony to the local work against poverty and in favour of peace and reconciliation.

The delegation consists of Bishops **Mgr. Juan Antonio Aznarez Cobo** from Spain, **Mgr. Aloys Jousten** from Belgium, **Mgr. Hugh Connolly** from Ireland and **Mgr. Felix Gmür** from Switzerland, and **Bernd Nilles**, Secretary General of CIDSE, the alliance of Catholic development agencies coordinating the tour. They are joined by local representatives of civil society, including **Fr. Pedro Hughes** of CELAM, the Latin American Episcopal Conference.

The first point on the tour itinerary was a mine site, La Puya, where residents of San José del Golfo and San Pedro Ayampuc have been resisting the operation of the ‘El Tambor’ mine since 2011, including a 2-year peaceful blockade. They say the mine will cause irreparable damage to their communities by polluting air and water and poses a threat to the livelihoods of the local communities. The mining project is led by *Exmigua, Extracciones Mineras de Guatemala*, a subsidiary of *Kappes, Cassidy & Associates*, USA.

“The protesters at La Puya are just ordinary people and they deserve to be heard, not just their immediate demands but also their long term vision for the development of the community,” said Mgr. Juan Antonio Aznarez Cobo after the visit.

The delegation celebrated Mass at San José del Golfo, one of the communities resisting the mine. After meeting local activists, Fr. Hughes said, *“the situation in La Puya typifies what is happening across Latin America in terms of popular resistance to extractive projects. The testimonies of the community leader and the participation of the local community demonstrates how seriously they take this struggle. They have a very balanced social analysis and way of expressing their struggle.”*

The tour is the second of its kind organised by CIDSE and European Catholic development agencies to Guatemala. Like the previous tour, in 2005, the target is to bring forward church testimony and support particularly in a context of serious threats against human rights defenders for their rights and territory.

“You could feel the tension between the community and the large numbers of police. But there was also a great sense of solidarity among the people there as well as priests and people who came from neighbouring parishes. It was a moment in which we all could see, hear and live the struggle of La Puya,” said Mgr. Connolly as the delegation left La Puya.

The tour, having started on June 22, will continue for the duration of the week, until June 27, visiting Santa Cruz del Quiché and Alta Verapaz, two other locations where human rights defenders are under threat.

Genaro Seoane, working with CIDSE's Spanish member organisation **Manos Unidas**, said, *“The public in Europe have almost no idea of what is happening in La Puya. CIDSE can act as a trustworthy interlocutor in bringing their cause to the people of Europe and beyond.”*

Human rights defenders are not only under threat in Guatemala. As the Bishops’ tour proceeds, a vote on how the human rights responsibilities of transnational corporations should be supervised is approaching at the **United Nations Human Rights Council** in Geneva, Switzerland. CIDSE Secretary General Bernd Nilles said, *“I was impressed by the strong messages from the community about protecting the environment and their broader vision for the life of their community. Their struggle is not just about their immediate needs but about the future of their environment and questioning the sustainability of this model of development. We call upon the governments at the UNHRC to agree to develop a treaty that would effectively protect communities and human rights defenders. This would help also the affected communities we have visited here in Guatemala.”*

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Notes to the editors

- [CIDSE](#) is an international alliance of Catholic development agencies. Its members share a common strategy in their efforts to eradicate poverty and establish global justice.
- **CIDSE members:** Broederlijk Delen (Belgium), CAFOD (England and Wales), CCFD - Terre Solidaire (France), Center of Concern (USA), Cordaid (the Netherlands), Development & Peace (Canada), Entraide et Fraternité (Belgium), eRko (Slovakia), Fastenopfer (Switzerland), FEC (Portugal), FOCSIV (Italy), Fondation Bridderlech Deelen (Luxembourg), KOO (Austria), Manos Unidas (Spain), MISEREOR (Germany), SCIAF (Scotland), Trócaire (Ireland)

[CIDSE](#) and [ACT Alliance](#)'s new report addressing the problems human rights defenders face: [Space for civil Society: How to protect and expand an enabling environment](#)

The CIDSE report [Human Rights Due Diligence - Policy measures for effective implementation](#) documents numerous situations on the ground that demonstrate the need a binding treaty.

Information on the approaching vote at the UNHRC [on the CIDSE web page](#) and [at the Treaty Movement mobilisation page](#)

CIDSE Partners that participate in the tour:

- Diócesis del Quiché
- [AJR](#) - Asociación Para la Justicia y la Reconciliación. The Association for Justice and Reconciliation is a Guatemala-based organization founded by survivors of Guatemala's military campaign against indigenous villages.
- [CALDH](#) - Centro para la Acción Legal en Derechos Humanos is a Guatemala-based legal organization created to hold government officials accountable for their roles in Guatemala's military campaign against the Mayan population.
- [ODHAG](#) - Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala. The Human Rights Office of the Archbishopric of Guatemala (ODHAG) provides medical assistance to victims of violence resulting from human rights violations.
- [SERJUS](#) - Servicios Jurídicos y Sociales, S.C is a development organization that works in the Western regions of Guatemala as well as Ixcán and the capital.
- [PTSM](#) - Pastoral de la Tierra San Marcos. The Social Pastoral Ministry of San Marcos programmes the improvement of living conditions especially with the poorest communities to transform unjust social structures, inspired by the example of Jesus and the Social Doctrine of the Church.
- [Red Kuchubal](#). A network organisation that markets products of 21 rural associations in southwest Guatemala. It promotes fair trade and a solidarity economy.
- [Plataforma Agraria](#). The international Land Coalition is a group of non-state actors that has proposed sweeping reforms to Guatemala's land tenure system.
- [CCDA](#) - Comité Campesino del Altiplano objective is to promote the development of campesino communities in Guatemala in order to elevate their standard of living by way of programs and projects that respond to the search for equality of conditions, participation and incidence in social, economic, cultural and political processes and forums in the country with the goal of building a new multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual state and national unity.
- [UDEFEGUA](#) - Unidad de Protección a Defensoras de Derechos Humanos was founded in 2004 with the objective of promoting the security of human rights defenders in Guatemala and to contribute to the protection of the political space in which they work.
- [Pastoral Social de Alta Verapaz](#). As part of the Caritas Internationalis network, Pastoral Social Caritas Verapaz is an NGO which aims to help the less fortunate in the Verapaces society.
- [ONG Sagrada Tierra](#)
- [FGT](#) - Fundación Guillermo Toriello is a human rights organisation working to promote the organisation and development of local communities and to break down some of the hostilities that emerged during the civil war years.
- [CUC](#) - Comité de Unidad Campesina works for integrated rural development and promote gender equity and ethnic, cultural and linguistic, as expressed in the Peace Accords diversity.
- [Comunidad Esperanza](#), in Cobán is a community based in an empowered area of Cobán, Guatemala. It develops a wide range of educational opportunities for children living and sometimes working around the local garbage collector.
- [ACODET](#) - Asociación de Defensa de la Tierra y los Recursos Naturales. The Association of Communities for Development and in Defence of Territory and Natural Resources (Acodet), includes communities threatened by Xalalá hydro power plant.

- [CODECA](#) - Asociación de Comités de Desarrollo Campesino works on improving the situation of the rural poor in Guatemala, focusing on issues such as the wage conditions for farmers, land reform and nationalisation of electric energy in the country.
- [AVANCSO](#) - Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales en Guatemala. AVANCSO is a centre for social science research.
- [Fundación Fray Domingo de Vico](#) strengthens the capacities of indigeneous communities in Alta Vera Paz.
- Komol Mayab / Consejo Maya
- Consejo de los Aj'quija'b/Mayan Spiritual Leaders Council
- Aj Awineleb' Land regularization and land use in Alta Verapaz