

UN anti-corruption body in Guatemala rebuts government's reasons for expulsion order

In a letter addressed to UN Secretary-General António Guterres, Iván Velásquez, the senior UN official in charge of the International Commission Against Impunity (CICIG) in Guatemala, has responded to the accusations made by the Government to justify its decision to expel the Commission from the country.

“Since its establishment in 2007, the CICIG has worked resolutely – in accordance with its mandate, accompanying national institutions – for the identification and dismantling of illegal organizations and clandestine security apparatuses, as well as promoting legal and institutional reforms to prevent their reappearance,” wrote Mr. Velásquez.

As a result of its work, the Commission has supported more than one hundred cases before the national courts, identified more than 60 complex criminal structures, obtained more than 300 convictions and promoted more than 34 legal reforms.

Thanking Guterres for consistently supporting the work of the CICIG in strengthening the rule of law and democracy, Mr. Velásquez pointed out that, despite this work, “smear campaigns, defamation and threats have increased” since the presentation of cases involving high-powered political and economic actors. “This is foreseeable with respect to an entity whose purpose is to attack structures that co-opt the State to profit, and refuse to lose privileges obtained illegally and illegitimately,” the letter reads.

Velásquez writes that “the fight against corruption faces opposition in all corners of the planet, but that should not stop global efforts to attack this scourge that prevents the development of countries and democracies.”

A ten page document attached to the letter responds in detail to a dozen accusations made by the government of Jimmy Morales against the CICIG. These include a complaint about the alleged interference of the CICIG in the internal affairs of Guatemala by promoting constitutional reforms in the area of strengthening justice, arguing that “the Agreement establishing the Commission expressly includes in its powers the promotion of legal and institutional reforms that prevent the action and reappearance of illegal bodies and clandestine security apparatuses.”

The accusation that the CICIG abused the use of force in searches carried out in 2016 at the offices of the Secretariat of Administrative Affairs and Security (SAAS) is also referred to in the document: Commissioner Velásquez recalls that “in accordance with Guatemalan law, searches are requested by the Public Prosecutor’s Office and authorized by the competent judge and that

the CICIG, in its technical support role, accompanies certain procedural acts and proceedings that the national authorities carry out, including raids.

Is Haiti better prepared for disasters, 9 years on from the 2010 earthquake?

Half a capital city destroyed, 220,000 reported dead and 1 million residents displaced. This was the toll of the 2010 Haiti earthquake, which struck on 12 January, 9 years ago. Staff at the UN Mission in Haiti were also affected, and there were 102 UN casualties, including the Secretary-General's Special Envoy, Hédi Annabi and his deputy, Luiz Carlos da Costa. It was the "biggest single loss of life in the history of UN Peacekeeping," the then-President of the UN Staff Union, Stephen Kisambira, said at the time.

One of the survivors was Sophie Boutaud de la Combe, today the head of communications for the UN Mission for Justice in Haiti ([MINUJUSTH](#)), who was seven months pregnant at the time and just a few days away from home leave. She had been in the headquarters of MINUJUSTH's predecessor, the UN Stabilisation Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), when the quake hit.

The building completely collapsed, but Ms. de la Courbe managed to escape through a collapsed wall. For many hours, she and her surviving colleagues searched through the rubble, looking for anyone still trapped under the building. Two days later, she reluctantly left Haiti, a situation she describes as "a trauma," her instinct being to help the UN and the people of Haiti. She eventually returned to the country in 2013, happy to be able to play a part in the rebuilding of the country, and honour her lost colleagues with her work.

9 years after the earthquake, the situation in Haiti is very different. The government, says Ms. de la Courbe, is now much better prepared for similar natural disasters. "A few months ago there was an earthquake in the north of the country. The state was prepared and they sent their people to support those affected, without MINUJUSTH involvement. It was not a major earthquake, but now the population knows how to react. And most importantly, we hear regularly how important it is to build better, to build strongly in case an earthquake would hit, not to endanger the people."



MINUSTAH

In 2016, the UN Mission in Haiti held a ceremony commemorating the 6th anniversary of the January 12, 2010 earthquake that claimed the lives of 250,000 Haitian's and 102 United Nations staff members – the highest loss of life in the UN's history.

[Libya: 'Substantial civilian casualties' in Derna, UN humanitarian chief 'deeply concerned'](#)

Increasing hostilities in the oil-rich city of Derna are becoming an increasing source of concern said the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Libya on Friday, following an intensification in fighting which has resulted in “substantial civilian casualties”.

“I am deeply concerned by the escalation of hostilities in the eastern city of Derna and the consequent further deterioration of the humanitarian situation in parts of the city”, said Maria Ribeiro.

ISIL, or Da'esh, terrorist fighters took over Derna in 2014, leading to a succession of battles for control of the city, involving the Shura Council of Mujahideen, a coalition of pro-sharia law Islamist militants, the Libyan national army and local militias.

In addition to substantial civilian casualties, Ms. Ribeiro said that recent intense fighting has reportedly resulted in deteriorating infrastructures and

services, leaving some civilians without basic food, water and urgent lifesaving medical care for families and the wounded.

I firmly call for unconditional, unimpeded and sustained humanitarian access to the affected civilians – *UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Libya*

“I firmly call for unconditional, unimpeded and sustained humanitarian access to the affected civilians in the old city”, she underscored, urging all conflict parties to respect and protect civilians and civilian facilities, and to “strictly adhere to their obligations under International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law.”

Since armed conflict erupted in Libya in 2011, during the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, some 200,000 people have been internally displaced.

Back in December, a trauma [hospital](#) in Benghazi, the country’s second-largest city, was hit and before that media reports said that Da’esh had claimed responsibility for attacking the Foreign Ministry in the capital, [Tripoli](#).

In November, fighting between armed militia damaged a Tripoli hospital for Women and Childbirth, resulting in a doctor being shot and a three-day halt to non-emergency medical services.

Meanwhile, migrants and refugees are being subjected to “[unimaginable horrors](#)” from the moment they enter Libya in what Ghassan Salamé, the head of the UN political mission there ([UNSMIL](#)), told the Security Council last month was a “hidden human calamity”.

[Canada grants asylum for Saudi teen who fled family: UNHCR](#)

Rahaf Mohammed al-Qunun’s desperate and ultimately successful bid for asylum in the face of alleged death-threats from her own family, provides a “glimpse into the precarious situation of millions of refugees worldwide” said the UN High Commissioner for Refugees on Friday.

In a [statement](#), the UN Refugee Agency, [UNHCR](#), said Canada had agreed to give asylum to the 18-year-old Saudi national who fled her family in Kuwait before her passport was taken away at the Bangkok airport on Sunday.

She was offered protection by UNHCR, and taken to a place of safety, while her claim was assessed by the UN agency, which decided that her claim was valid. Thai officials blocked Saudi requests for her to be sent back to

Kuwait.

The agency welcomed the decision of the Canadian Government to provide international protection and a new home for the Saudi national there as a resettled refugee.

UNCHR chief Filippo Grandi said in his statement that “refugee protection today is often under threat and cannot always be assured, but in this instance international refugee law and overriding values of humanity have prevailed.”

UNHCR consistently advocates for the principle of non-refoulement, which states that anyone confirmed, or claiming to be in need of international protection, cannot be returned to a territory where their life or freedom are threatened. This principle is recognized as customary international law and is also enshrined in Thailand’s treaty obligations, according to UNHCR, although it is not a party to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, defining the status of refugees.

With political sentiment and public attitudes towards refugees having hardened in some countries in recent years, formal resettlement – the mechanism by which Ms al-Qunun has been accepted by Canada – is available only to a fraction of the world’s 25.4 million refugees, typically those at greatest risk, many of whom are women.

The case was dealt with on a fast-track ‘emergency’ basis in light of the urgency of her situation. Ms al-qunun said that she would be killed if sent back home.

FROM THE FIELD: A new life beyond kneading bread

Who would imagine that the smell of fresh bread wafting through a bakery could change the life of a young Syrian refugee for a struggling young Syrian refugee?

But that is pretty much what happened to Mohamad Hamza Alemam, when the 23-year-old Syrian refugee sheltering in Germany entered the *Privatbäckerei Wiese bäckerei*.

Initially he started working there to learn German. But over time as his language skills improved, he began an assistant apprenticeship programme, mastering the basics of breadmaking and how to run the shop, broadening his vocational qualifications.

“When I go back to Syria one day, I hope to take a little bit of this German culture, this German bread, with me”, he says.

Read more [here](#) about Mohamad, and bakery owner Björn Wiese, who employs ten refugees and asylum-seekers – a sixth of his workforce.