

Maria Cuc, criminalized land and Q'eqchi' rights defender in Guatemala

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/maria-cuc-criminalized-land-and-qeqchi-rights-defender-in-guatemala>

**“Defending your territory is not a crime,
rather it is defending the habitat of humanity”**

Maria Choc is sister-in-law of Adolfo Ich, land and rights defender killed in 2009 while denouncing mining related harms and violations. Maria is sister of Angelica Choc, widow of Adolfo Ich, now leading justice struggles in Guatemala and Canada for the death of her husband. And, Maria is sister of Ramiro Choc, who spent 6 years in jail as a political prisoner – criminalized on malicious charges for his land and rights defense work.



I am facing three charges for crimes I have not committed: aggravated usurpation, illegal detention and threats. This is how crimes are invented to criminalize, imprison and assassinate human rights defenders in our territories. These trial processes damage each one of us, in body, spirit and mind, and they harm us economically. These 'false charges' trials also affect and endanger our loved ones, daughters and sons.

On May 19, Maria goes to court to face corrupted criminal charges for her land, rights and environmental defense work.

Since 2007, Maria Cuc has worked with Rights Action, in one capacity or another. Since 2010, Maria has been a strong supporter of the 13 Q'eqchi' plaintiffs, including her sister Angelica, in the landmark Hudbay Minerals lawsuits in Canada. Since her illegal capture in January 2018 on these malicious charges, we have supported her legal defense and family security costs.

“To be an interpreter is not a crime. Rather, it is a human right. Defending your territory is not a crime, rather it is defending the habitat of humanity”

By Maria Magdalena Cuc Choc
El Estor, Izabal, April 21, 2022

After the opening of my criminal trial on April 21, I tried to calm my mind, my nerves, and take my notebook and unburden myself in it. It is sad to face this trial against me. It makes me very angry because I do not have the economic resources.

This is how we defenders live the processes of injustice, simply for defending our rights and territories. Seeking transparent justice in Guatemala requires a lot of economic funds, because everything is co-opted by the corruption of the powerful.

Thank you Rights Action, for your unconditional support for me, going back years. Now, again, I reiterate my petition for support for my next hearing – May 19. I hope for your understanding and am always grateful for your support.

I am Maria Magdalena Cuc Choc, an Indigenous woman of the Q'eqchi ethnic group, from the Q'eqchi territory in the department of Izabal. I know my rights and those of my people. I am a defender of human rights and of the territory.

Why am I a human rights defender?

During the time of the internal armed conflict, many of our parents and grandparents were massacred and devastated, dispossessed of their ancestral lands using military force against them. I am one of the daughters, granddaughters of those who suffered from the internal armed conflict, and for this reason I defend my rights and those of my people, not to mention my territory.

Many of us are discriminated against, made invisible, violated for not speaking the Spanish language imposed by the conquerors of our lands. I, as Maria Choc,

collaborate voluntarily doing the work of interpreting the Q'eqchi mother tongue to Spanish, in the search for transparent justice for the people.

To be an interpreter is not a crime. Rather, it is a human right. Defending your territory is not a crime, rather it is defending the habitat of humanity.

My country, Guatemala, has had corrupt rulers. It is worth mentioning that during the government of Otto Perez Molina (2012-2015) many licenses of transnational companies, foreign companies, mining licenses were executed. Also, many ghost companies and ghost jobs were created, and during his government many lands of Q'eqchi families in the area of Livingston, Izabal were dispossessed.

One of my volunteer tasks was to accompany a group of Q'eqchi brothers and sisters, who were dispossessed of their lands, to the Public Ministry in the departmental capital of Puerto Barrios. It was there where, exercising my work as an interpreter, an arrest warrant was issued against me in 2016, requested by the company LISBAL, S.A.

This company is owned by the former Member of Congress for Izabal, Rodrigo Lainfiesta Rimula, who himself was charged with money laundering during his term as Member of Congress. They are partners, friends and financiers with former president Otto Perez Molina.

These corrupt officials are the ones who have criminalized me since 2018 for serving as an interpreter for my Q'eqchi brothers and sisters who were dispossessed of their lands by these people. Since 2018 I have been criminalized, I was imprisoned for two days and three nights in the women's prison of Puerto Barrios, Izabal.

I was able to leave detention, on bail of five thousand quetzales (Q5,000) and certain conditions. Every 30 days I have to sign an attendance book in the court of my locality.

Every year that passed by, I have been summoned three times to the courts of Puerto Barrios, Izabal, only for the trial to have been suspended each and every time ... until now.

It was not until April 21, 2022, that the court finally initiated my case. A malicious trial, orchestrated by corrupt judges who are paid for their personal collaboration. It is worth mentioning Judge Anibal Arteaga.

I am facing three charges for crimes I have not committed: aggravated usurpation, illegal detention and threats. This is how crimes are invented to criminalize, imprison and assassinate human rights defenders in our territories. These trial processes damage each one of us, in body, spirit and mind, and they harm us economically. These 'false charges' trials also affect and endanger our loved ones, daughters and sons.

This is the situation I am suffering. I make this call to the national and international organizations that watch over human rights to be aware of my case of criminalization as a defender. I defend rights, because it is enshrined in the Magna Carta of my country, in the ILO agreements, and in Guatemala's "peace agreements".

We act because it is our duty to defend our rights and territory.

This judicial process I am facing requires a lot of economic expense, as I have to travel long distances, paying for transportation, lodging and food. This next time, May 19, I will again be in court together with the experts and witnesses in my case. I am innocent of what I am accused of and I will continue to fight. No one can silence my voice.

Att. Maria Choc

Maria Choc: "I haven't robbed anyone. I haven't murdered anyone. I am an Indigenous woman in Guatemala, defending her territories, her lands, her rights"
<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/maria-choc-i-havent-robbed-anyone>

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