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**OPEN LETTER**  
**CLARIFICATION OF THE WORK OF PEACE BRIGADES INTERNATIONAL AS AN INTERNATIONAL  
NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATION WORKING WITH HUMAN RIGHTS**

In response to comments made about Peace Brigades International (PBI) in a national newspaper opinion article and in a governmental press release on the 26<sup>th</sup> of March and on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April<sup>1</sup> of 2011 (respectively), we would like to clarify that:

PBI has accompanied human rights defenders who have been attacked or who are under threat over the last 30 years across a variety of countries. We respond to petitions for help made by people and civil society organisations who request international accompaniment whilst carrying out non-violent work in promoting and defending human rights, particularly when those human rights have been violated or when they are under threat.

The accompaniment that PBI has developed in Guatemala is implemented in accordance with the principles of non-violence, non-interference and non-partisanship. We practice physical accompaniment, the lobbying of authorities as well as of the diplomatic community and publish information on the work undertaken by the PBI field team and on relevant aspects of Guatemalan news. Whilst respecting the principle of non-interference in the affairs of state, we express our concerns about the proper implementation of human rights and on the right to defend such legal standards.

The work of PBI is carried out with the full knowledge and support of Guatemalan public institutions, of the international community and of civil society, and acts in strict compliance with national law. Our organisation is a legally registered entity in Guatemala, and we abide by all of the existing legal requirements that enable the proper functioning of the organisation in the country.

Representatives of international and national institutions, and of civil society organisations from across the world have repeatedly expressed the value of PBI's work in protecting human rights defenders, and in creating spaces within which conflicts can be resolved peacefully.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One of the most widely read newspapers of Guatemala, Prensa Libre, published an article in the opinion section of the paper in which Peace Brigades International is described in the following terms:

*"[...] Never before had 13 land estates been illegally occupied in unison [by campesinos seeking access to land in the area of Polochic in the department of Alta Verapaz]; which gives us an idea of the logistics and costs required to mount such a mobilisation. The groups involved in this ranged from CUC, CONIC, UVOC [rural campesino organisations], Fundacion Toriello [a national NGO], and the red waistcoat wearing 'canchitas' [a derogatory term which can be translated as 'blondies'] of Peace Brigades International, whose work involves denouncing Guatemala at the international level and who probably receive funding for this work so as to coordinate their actions. These red waistcoats appear at all the illegal land occupations. We don't know where they come from, whether it be from Germany, England, Canada or wherever, since they never respond to any requests directed at them."*  
This cited fragment forms part of an article called: "De nuevo al pasado" [Once again to the past], written by Humberto Preti – a known columnist of the paper. It was published in the printed edition of the PL on the 26th of March and can be read online by using this link: [http://prensalibre.com.gt/opinion/nuevo-pasado\\_0\\_451154963.html](http://prensalibre.com.gt/opinion/nuevo-pasado_0_451154963.html). In general the article formulates an opinion on a land claim conflict in the area of Valle del Polochic (municipality of Panzós, department of Alta Verapaz).

In addition to the above, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April various papers published a press release from the Government "La verdad sobre los desalojos en el Polochic (The truth about the evictions of Polochic)", wherein they mention the presence of various international organisations during the evictions, among these PBI: <http://www2.maga.gob.gt/portal.maga.gob.gt/portal/page/portal/2010/Unnamed%20Site%202/comunicadopo.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Examples of the importance that international institutions such as the United Nations attribute to the work of PBI on human rights can be read in the following declaration from the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Margaret Sekaggya: "I take this opportunity to voice my full support to the valuable and legitimate work of PBI in several regions of the world, which is a source of inspiration to all of us." A declaration made in the Spanish Congress on the 4th of February 2010, and included in the report of the Special Rapporteur for the situation of human rights defenders: [http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/16session/A-HRC-16-44-Add3\\_AEFS.pdf](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/16session/A-HRC-16-44-Add3_AEFS.pdf).

PBI has never taken part in 'illegal land occupations', and has never used funds aimed at such ends<sup>3</sup>. The facts that detail the occurrences that took place mid-March in the Valle del Polochic area of the department of Alta Verapaz, and regarding which PBI and other Guatemalan organisations are mentioned in the previously cited press releases, relate to the eviction of various communities, resulting in the injury of several people as well as in the death of one person, among other consequences<sup>4</sup>. Two PBI volunteers were present in the area accompanying the Unit for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders of Guatemala (UDEFEQUA) on its work of verifying threats and violations of human rights. During this accompaniment PBI observed, along with other international institutions, such as the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and national institutions, such as the Human Rights Ombudsman (PDH) and the Presidential Commission for Human Rights (COPREDEH), various moments of the eviction of the community of Quinich on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March, having positioned ourselves at the entrance that leads into the aforementioned community.

PBI would like to emphasise that we profoundly respect the right and the ability of Guatemalan communities, civil society and human rights organisations to promote, develop and practice the defence of human rights, as well as the right of the same actors to request accompaniment from other organisations when these rights have been violated or when they are under threat due to the work that Guatemala civil society undertakes.

We therefore wish to clarify, through this letter, the work that PBI carries out in Guatemala, and correct the erroneous and uninformed claims set out in the opinion article of the 26<sup>th</sup> of March. We would also like to express our profound concern that such mistaken information can discredit the work and risk the security of PBI's volunteers.

In addition to this we are concerned that such claims can affect the work of international accompaniment in Guatemala, in turn diminishing the ability to protect those who defend and promote human rights across the country<sup>5</sup>. In a context of rising violence and aggression, protective accompaniment continues to be desired by human rights defenders, communities, organisations and individuals who struggle peacefully for the proper implementation of human rights and whom denounce the vulnerability of those same rights.

We therefore request that the relevant authorities, the international community and civil society:

- be attentive to erroneous affirmations which relate to the work of Guatemalan and international organisations, whilst ensuring that such affirmations are not reproduced, so as to safeguard the security and integrity of the members of those organisations,
- publicly support the work of international accompaniment as well as the community of human rights defenders in Guatemala.

We thank you for your time and attention.

Yours sincerely,

**Peace Brigades International**

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<sup>3</sup> The financing that PBI receives is destined exclusively to the work of international observation and accompaniment, and in no way involves the financing of Guatemalan organisations.

<sup>4</sup> Multiple Guatemalan and international civil society organisations have questioned the proceedings that led to the eviction of various communities, as well as the violence used against those same communities during the process. According to these sources, the procedures did not conform with international human rights standards. Please see the press releases published on the website for the Copenhagen Initiative for Central America and the Caribbean (CIFCA): <http://www.cifca.org/CartaF%5B1%5D.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Please see the 2010 Annual report of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Guatemala (OHCHR): <http://www.oacnudh.org.gt/actualizacion2010/UPLOAD/InformeAnual2010%28esp%29.pdf>; as well as the report of the Unit for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders of Guatemala (UDEFEQUA): Año electoral. Qué les depara a los defensores de derechos humanos, bi-monthly report, Guatemala, 2011.