

# CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATION TO HONDURAS AND GUATEMALA MARCH 19 – 27, 2022

SUMMARY REPORT  
and REFLECTIONS  
by Jhonathan F. Gómez

From March 19 to 27 of 2022, I had the unique opportunity to participate in a historic delegation to Honduras and Guatemala. Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective, in collaboration with SOA Watch, CISPES, and NISGUA, organized the trip with the goal of taking progressive Congressional Representatives to meet and learn from human rights defenders of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. This trip marked my work in the Latin América program, and I feel that the delegation's connections, experiences, and relationships are already influencing my work.

Let's start by stating something obvious. It is not every day that politicians travel to any country with activists to meet other activists. These trips only happen in the context of solidarity and the understanding that experiential learning is at the center of social change. On the delegation we had the good fortune of having Congressman Jesús "Chuy" García from Illinois' 4th district, Congresswoman Cori Bush from Missouri's 1st, Congresswoman Ilhan Omar from Minnesota's 5th, Congressman Jamaal Bowman from New York's 16th, and a staff person from Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky's office (IL-9).

Now imagine a crowded bus, but not those used school buses from the United States that end up in Guatemala and get a royal paint job and neon lights. It was a modest, slightly more comfortable bus. Fill it with luggage, bags of snacks, Congressional Representatives, some of their staff, a Congresswoman's husband, and about fifteen leaders/activists/human rights defenders from the United States.

There are a few other layers of this unprecedented delegation that I want to highlight. Six historic legacy organizations participated on the delegation. Each one of these organizations had at least one person on staff that is part of the Latin American and Caribbean diaspora in the United States. All of us who are part of social movements in the United

States are grateful to live out the internationalist solidarity work of our parents and grandparents. Some of us were born in Latin America, and some in the United States. The work of these historic legacy organizations is measured by decades of advocacy, solidarity, and action. I shy away from saying that this is what solidarity work is today, but it could most certainly look like this from now on. A Latinx and diaspora-led solidarity movement in the United States is already here.

Throughout the trip, we had important conversations and debates with Congressional Representatives and human rights defenders from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. However, the unintended happened. Organizations like ours don't get to spend a full week with each other, let alone have collective reflections with other human rights defenders from Central America. The importance of this must be emphasized. As part of the diaspora, we have a different perspective on this work. Our debates and shared analysis on the intersection of race, class, gender, sexual identity, and culture inform and guide our work, and are all part of a different way of working in solidarity with Central and Latin America today. My words will not do justice to the historic delegation we were about to begin. So, I'll paraphrase Lulu Matute from SOA Watch, "We have the privilege of being here and there, and to do this work in a different way."



March 27, 2022 | Guatemala City, Guatemala  
Last day of the delegation

Lulu's words speak volumes to me. They express how we connect to the land that birthed us, or nourished us from afar, land with ancestral connections to resistance which today continues to give meaning to who we are and guides our work in ways that were not possible before.

We landed in Honduras on March 19th at the new Palmerola International Airport. The airport is situated in a portion of a military base operated by the Honduras Air Force, built by the United States in the 1940s. This is one of the many glaring reminders of the legacy of U.S. imperialism, intervention, and military aid to Honduras. That same day we had a meeting scheduled with members of the Honduran Congress. Some of us knew that there was a possibility to meet with President Xiomara Castro and members of her cabinet, but nothing had been confirmed. As soon as our plane landed, we were informed that we were meeting with the President. Anxiety and excitement filled the bus.

As we entered the Presidential Palace of Honduras, we walked a red carpet, shook hands with staff in suits, were photographed by the media, and were escorted to the President. It was a very unique experience. Inside, we lined up to be personally greeted by President Xiomara Castro. Present at the meeting were members of her cabinet who contextualized the challenges facing Honduras after the narco-dictatorship government of Juan Orlando Hernández ended. President Castro highlighted the unprecedented debt that her administration inherited. Corruption, impunity, and repression ran unchecked for twelve years, and everything that has been infected will take time to heal. Some estimates place the country's internal debt at U.S.\$179 billion, and the external debt at U.S.\$157 billion. President



March 19, 2022 | Tegucigalpa, Honduras  
President of Honduras Xiomara Castro with  
Jhonathan F. Gómez after a meeting with the delegation

Xiomara's challenge to govern could be heavily influenced by economics. Despite the crisis, the room was filled with excitement and hope, as was expressed by Congressman Garcia and Congresswoman Omar when they directly

expressed their support for Xiomara Castro's efforts to return the country to a state of democracy.

It is no surprise that President Castro's cabinet has many people who support and come from social movements. Natalie Roque, who leads Honduras' Secretariat of Human Rights, embodies that vision that comes from the people. Honduras is a country in transition, and it is important that we are aware of the crimes against humanity that we committed during the dictatorship. People like Roque understand very well that it is imperative to preserve the country's historic memory and fight against a revisionist history that has turned martyrs into criminals and depoliticized the people. At the meeting, she directly thanked the international human rights community and mentioned our sister organization, Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective, for standing in solidarity with the people of Honduras. Unfortunately, we were late to our meeting with members of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Honduran Congress, but they understood that we were with the President.

On the 21st we arrived in La Esperanza, in the Department of Intibucá, Honduras. We were privileged to be invited to Utopía, COPINH's headquarters. This is a unique place -- a multipurpose space full of activities and projects. The day began with an Indigenous ceremony to commemorate the special occasion. We met "Bertita", Berta Cáceres' daughter, and with other members of the Lenca Indigenous community, they discussed her mother's legacy. One particular moment stands out. After a Lenca elder finished sharing about the continued resistance of their community Congresswoman Omar said, "we stand in solidarity with you, we hear you". It was a pure reminder of Berta Cáceres' vision of solidarity for Honduras and Latin America.

In Utopía, we also met a special delegation of human rights defenders representing various organizations from El Salvador. COFAPPES, a group that works with family members of political prisoners, shared the inhumane situations people face under President Nayib Bukele's regime. We ended the day with a visit to the grave of the internationally recognized Indigenous leader Berta Cáceres, who was assassinated in 2016 for opposing a U.S.-backed hydroelectric project. Members of COPINH shared how still today, impunity remains as the powerful actors ultimately responsible for her assassination have not been brought to justice.



Three found guilty of Caceres' murder received training at U.S. military institutions.



March 21, 2022 | La Esperanza, Intibucá, Honduras  
Indigenous Lenca ceremony at Utopía, COPINH headquarters

The next day we traveled to the northern Caribbean coast of Tela Bay in Atlántida. As we walked the beach towards a building where our meeting would take place, we heard drumming and singing. That was a reminder and a sign that we were in Garifuna territory. Congresswoman Bush shared with us that for many years she had wanted to visit a place where Black people had a connection to their roots and ancestry. She also reflected that because the complex legacy of colonialism and slavery in the United States, Black people find it challenging to connect to their ancestry. Soon after, the Congresswoman and other delegation members joined in the dancing. Next, we heard from internationally renowned human rights defender and leader of OFRANEH, Miriam Miranda. She then ceded the time to various representatives of Garifuna communities so that they could share some of the challenges their communities face today. We heard how as in many places in Central America people are migrating to the United States for various reasons. One thing that has directly affected these Indigenous Black communities is how ancestral lands are affected by agrofuel plantations and tourist projects. People are being displaced, and there are direct attempts to buy their lands to make room for these development projects, which communities have repeatedly rejected.

On the 24th, we arrived in Guatemala City. We drove straight to a meeting with a delegation of progressive Congresswomen, including Sonia Gutiérrez Raguay, one of the few Indigenous members of Congress and a human rights defender in her own right. Lucrecia Hernández Mack was also present. She is the daughter of Myrna Elizabeth

Mack Chang, a human rights defender murdered by the Guatemala army in 1990 for her work with Indigenous communities. We also had the privilege to hear from Judge Pablo Xitumul de Paz, who is suffering criminalization and is considered an activist judge by the Guatemalan military and oligarchy for allowing high-profile and high-risk cases to move forward in his court. He is one of Guatemala's most important judges because of his rulings on cases against former military officials who committed acts of genocide and crimes against humanity. The next day, we visited the peaceful resistance camps of La Puya and the Escobal Mine. They are an incredible reminder that the work for justice is an everyday, long-term, lifelong project. Both resistances have stood for many years and La Puya's 10-year anniversary is a monument to resistance.

As the women, and it is important to note that it was always the women who led the resistance of La Puya, spoke about the last ten years of repression, but also of the victories. Congresswoman Bush spoke up. She said, "I too have been shot by the police; I too have been beaten for protecting my community". I have many feelings and thoughts about that moment. And as I reflect on it, the delegation had many of these transformative moments for all of us.



March 26, 2022 | Santa Rosa, Guatemala  
Jhonathan F. Gómez and Congresswoman Cori Bush at the Santa Rosa and Jalapa Resistance Camp

Our last visit and activities on March 26 were led by authorities and leaders from the Indigenous Xinca parliament, who are also part of the resistance against the Escobal mining project in Santa Rosa, Guatemala. We exchanged stories and heard how they are committed to protecting the land because they see it as a responsibility to their families, and the future of their children and grandchildren.

After returning to the U.S., we got right to work. We organized a webinar geared towards the Latinx community and invited the public to participate in a conversation about the role of the diaspora in Latin America solidarity today. The event was a success. It allowed us to continue an ongoing reflection where we ask ourselves what the future of solidarity is for the people of Latin America living in the United States today.



March 21, 2022 | La Esperanza, Intibucá, Honduras  
Mural inside Utopía, COPINH headquarters

I also spent many weeks working with Congressman Jesús "Chuy" García's team on a June 6, 2022 delegation report-back event. Illinois State Representative Delia Ramírez, the daughter of Guatemalan immigrants, was invited to speak, and I had the opportunity to co-host the event with Lulu Matute from SOA Watch. The Congressman gave a speech that recognized the troubled relationship between the United States and Latin America and that foreign policy in the way it is now must change. Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky shared a video and expressed her commitment to Latin American human rights and that it is important to look to the Global South for inspiration. Yesenia Portillo from CISPEP and Elise Roberts from Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective also joined us for the event. As part of the work of international solidarity with Latin America, we articulated a shared critique of an outdated and problematic idea of U.S. aid to Latin America. An idea rooted in neoliberalism and colonialism that does not center nor benefit Indigenous and marginalized communities but instead continues to privilege corporations. This is clearly laid out in President Biden's plan for Central America.

**Watch June 6 Townhall event at**  
<https://bit.ly/CATownhall>

As I look at the work ahead this year and in the years to come, I hope to continue to also support the work of the diaspora fighting for immigrant justice and reparations. I hope to further connect with the Indigenous communities of Central America and to walk with them to better understand their work. We must continue to re-write the narrative in the United States and the world that renders the work of Indigenous and marginalized communities as invisible and believes they don't already have the answers to the ills of capitalism and imperialism. When, in fact, they are leading and stand as the vanguard of resistance around the world. Our work is to listen and learn, to stand in solidarity and to take action.

## *Memory*

*by Aranella Vélez*

*Images course through my mind  
like drops in a rainy day  
hurriedly,  
from hollowness to torment,  
to the violence of mornings irrupting in time  
I live these desperate days  
when history is being rewritten in our streets  
and I feel  
a new light shining here  
walkers  
resisters  
transfiguring the city.  
Walls whisper of their passage,  
they will not abide oblivion.*