



onlyachild@aol.com

PO Box 990885 Boston, MA 02199

<http://www.onlyachild.org>

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To the many who have cared,

Extensive coverage was given to the death of 53 immigrants, trapped in a tractor trailer this past summer, south of San Antonio Texas. A large number of those who perished, 23 to be exact, were from Guatemala. Seventeen of the 23 deceased were 25 years of age or younger. And among those seventeen, 3 were minors: Jonny Tziquin Tzoc, 17, Juan Wilmer Tulul Tapaz, 14, and Melvin Guachiac Sipac, 13.

Most had taken the journey aware of its perilous nature. Their ambitions were simple, to find work paying a life sustaining wage. Their goals were modest, to assist families mired in unrelenting poverty and, when possible, to put enough of their earnings aside to enable them to one day return to their homeland and begin a small business of their own. Their dreams were common and age old, transcending time, location and culture. They had traveled thousands of miles under hazardous conditions in search of a better life.

Guatemala has seen a sharp decline in school enrollment of late, both in middle and high school levels. The decline has been attributed to economics. Pandemic-based unemployment in combination with high inflation have compelled many adolescents to abandon their studies prematurely, to assist parents struggling financially. Some have sought employment in Guatemala's informal sector by piecing together more than one job, while trying to make ends meet. Others find work in small, off-the-grid businesses. Either way, employment in the informal sector offers little in terms of benefits and security.

Others still have left school to travel north, joining an ever-increasing number of immigrants willing to relocate in pursuit of the kind of opportunity which, for some time, has eluded them in their native lands. Many if not most of the victims of the San Antonio tragedy had journeyed in search of such opportunity.

A recent article in *el Periodico*, Guatemala's best newspaper in terms of depth of reporting, attributed the recent decline in enrollment among middle school (11% in 2021 / 3.6% thus far in 2022) and high school (10% in 2021 / 8.1 % thus far in 2022) students not only to post-pandemic hardship and economic crises, but also, to a government that does not concern itself with the needs of poor families. The article quoted a representative from the Santiago Development Project, stating that, "the country has an educational system that deepens the existing inequalities that, 'have favored the most favored and left behind those who have always been left behind' ".

Much of the decline in enrollment has taken place in public schools which largely serve the poor and other families unable to afford the costs of the superior private schools, which are more readily found in Guatemala's more affluent urban areas. Not surprisingly, the dropout rate is higher in rural areas, where public school education abounds. Equally predictable, rural areas also largely feed the flow of immigration originating in Mexico, Guatemala and much of Central America.

The University of San Carlos (USAC) is Guatemala's largest public university. Reversing the common and widespread standard defining pre-university level education, USAC has earned the reputation for providing a level of education superior to many of Guatemala's private universities. Approximately 200,000 students daily attended classes at its main campus in Guatemala City during pre-COVID times, easily making it Guatemala's largest university.

USAC elects a new president every 4 years. The most recent election was scheduled for this past April 27<sup>th</sup>. The very complicated process allows USAC graduates, current students and faculty to have a voice and a vote in the selection of the president, seeking to provide due democratic process while guaranteeing the integrity of the election. Despite such efforts, on April 26<sup>th</sup>, one day before the election was to be held, a blatant attempt to manipulate the election in favor of one of two final candidates, Walter Mazaiegos, took place.

Accusations of corruption and attempted electoral fraud quickly came forward in response. At 5 AM on the morning of the 27<sup>th</sup>, student protesters entered and took control of the Museum of San Carlos, where the election was to have been held, forcing its cancellation.

The situation was widely reported by the Guatemalan press in the weeks that followed. A full-blown scandal resulted. A second election was scheduled for mid-May and went off as planned, but the logistics defining the how and when and where of its implementation only served to reveal a more brazen intention to manipulate the results. Walter Mazariegos was declared the winner. Outrage ensued.

Walter Mazariegos was sworn into office on July 1<sup>st</sup>, over the objections of USAC students and faculty, as well as much of the general population who continued to refute the results of the second election, while calling for a third. To date the situation has not been resolved. Students protesting the election have also occupied buildings housing USAC's governing bodies, administrative offices and classrooms belonging to faculties most fervently refusing to acknowledge Mazariegos' presidency.

It has been alleged that, those responsible for manipulating the election in favor of Mazariegos, as well as Mazariegos himself, seek to privatize USAC. Should USAC ultimately become a private institution, the consequences would be devastating to poor and working-class families as USAC provides their best and, in many cases, only opportunity for obtaining a university education. Once again, I refer to a quote from a recent article in *el Periodico*, which stated, "the country has an educational system that deepens the existing inequalities that have favored the most favored and left behind those who have always been left behind".

The problems surrounding the recent election of a new president at USAC reflect a worrisome trend on a national level. In recent years, there seems to have been a systematic attempt by the Guatemalan government to dismantle first, the democratic process and then, by degree, democracy itself. The Guatemalan congress has long been accused of corrupt, self-serving practices. Current president Alejandro Giammattei has been widely accused of working in tandem with congress to blatantly bypass the lawful process for appointing justices to Guatemala's highest courts, in an attempt to secure justices compliant with corrupt governance.

Such efforts to undermine the governmental system of checks and balances was widely criticized. Among the most outspoken critics was *el Periodico*. On July 29, José Rubén Zamora, founder and president of *el Periodico*, was arrested on charges of money laundering, blackmail and influence peddling. The wide consensus is that the charges have no validity and are a thinly veiled attempt to intimidate journalists and inhibit freedom of the press.

*El Periodico* has consistently published investigations into corrupt political practices, especially on a national level. Such criticism has extensively targeted the administration of President Giammattei. An August 4th Op Ed piece in *the Washington Post* commenting on the situation concluded, "If Guatemala wants to retain any semblance of democratic legitimacy, Mr. Zamora must be released and all charges dropped." To date, Mr. Zamora has not been released and the charges remain pending.

Most of our residents who study at university level attend USAC. The lingering division resulting from the election has served to disrupt the educational process. Many but not all students are sympathetic with the occupation of the campus. Classes continue to be conducted on line. Students have the option to attend live classes virtually or view taped and posted versions of them later, at their convenience. Not attending the 'live' classes disqualify students from taking exams and passing the classes, however. Those students who view the taped version of classes do so in solidarity with those students who occupy university buildings in protest, and have begun to overwhelm the platforms used to conduct classes, administer exams and conduct administrative services, causing their collapse, further disrupting studies.

I, in no way, have tried to influence our USAC students as to whether they should participate in the protest or not. One of our residents, Agustín, is currently in his second semester of his junior year at USAC. He continues to participate in all of his live virtual classes. Thus far his classes have been conducted without interruption although, on 2 occasions, he has had exams canceled, later to be rescheduled. He has confided to me that the entire situation has made it more difficult for him to stay focused and maintain the same enthusiasm he had for his studies before the election. Nevertheless, he perseveres.

There has been much criticism of late, both on national and international levels, alleging that the presidents of Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua have governed in ways more indicative of dictators, rather than democratically elected presidents. The concern is that the region is on the verge of once again embracing an oppressive form of leadership. Should this ultimately happen, the shift towards the more democratic form of governance pursued during the past 2 to 3 decades could ultimately be judged a mere respite from the corrupt governance which has long dominated and defined the area.

Despite such concerns. Only A Child, like Agustín and our other USAC students, carries on despite facing ever-present obstacles, increasing concern and great uncertainty - with unwavering believe in our mission to provide opportunity where it had previously not existed. Thank you for your continued support.

May God bless.

*George*

George