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Guatemala, Conflict

Guatemala: Solving the Nation's Issues

Guatemala is a country in Central America that has neighbors of Mexico and Belize to the North, and El Salvador and Honduras to the South. Guatemala contains numerous volcanoes and large stretches of mountain ranges and is situated between two coastlines, one to the east, the Caribbean Sea, and one to the west, the Pacific. However, Guatemala has one of the highest poverty levels worldwide. The beautiful landscape of the country hides Guatemala's inability to provide living wages and good education to the many citizens who depend on farming for jobs. Also, much of the crops grown here are exported for-profit, taking away much of the land that could grow more food for the Guatemalan people. By improving food security, malnutrition, and education in Guatemala, conflict in this area can be addressed, and more importantly, reduced.

Guatemala is home to 17,915,658 people with 51.44% being made up of the urban population and 48.56% making up the rural population. The 42,043 square miles of area that Guatemala covers, consists of a mainly tropical savanna climate year-round with a warm Mediterranean summer climate that experiences very distinct dry and wet seasons. The dry season will occur from November to April, whereas the wet season will take place from May to October. Guatemala is home to one of its most active volcanoes, the Pacaya Volcano, which is located near Guatemala City, and erupted not too long ago in June of 2015. There are 37 volcanoes here and these volcanic highlands run east to west from Mexico to El Salvador and divide the country into 3 distinct regions that greatly differ in their landscape, climate, and elevation. The different types of terrain require different farming techniques, with some areas being better for food growth and others more difficult to farm. Remote regions of the country, besides being difficult to farm, present transportation challenges and may not be used to their full potential.

Guatemala is the Presidential Republic led by President Alejandro Giammattei, where the executive is separate from the legislative branch and is led by the head of the government. Among the many that live there, agriculture is the main way the people get their food, growing it right in their backyard. The average farm size for a family is about 0.5 hectares, which is equivalent to about ½ of the inside part of a track's grassy field. 43% of the land is for agricultural use and 36% is forested, while 13% is arable and 24% is pasture land. Among the major crops are coffee, sugar, bananas, and cotton, along with hemp, essential oils, and cacao. The biggest industries in Guatemala are the production of coffee, paper industries, tourism, and the production of tourism. With some of Guatemala's export partners being the United States, and its neighboring countries of El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Honduras, its biggest exports are Bananas, bringing in \$1.35 billion, Coffee bringing in \$775 million, textiles of Knit Sweaters bringing in \$676 million, and Raw Sugar generating \$448 million.

The average family size in Guatemala is 4.7 and typically consists of married parents with 5-6 children. Guatemala is known for being family-oriented and they attempt to spend as much time together as they can during meals or family gatherings. They are very committed and protective of their children, especially the girls in their family for they are more susceptible to gang-related crimes and events in the communities. People in Guatemala tend to have a reputation of being very friendly and informative to tourists, trying to provide them with anything they can to make their stay more welcoming and any instruction they can give to help. A typical house is made of scavenged materials, cornstalks, and cane, with lattice-like walls they build to provide more privacy and protection for themselves and their belongings, but is very ineffective.

Although there is plenty of farmland and crop in this country, malnutrition plagues this area, giving it the 4th highest rate of chronic malnutrition in the world. A typical family diet consists of corn mush, meat, grains, beans, white rice, and tortillas that can be seen at almost every meal of people living here. For breakfast, these items can be seen being combined with eggs and plantains, and fruit is also a main staple of most diets. Because of its proximity to the equator, the rain forests and jungles receive an ample amount of rainfall, which in turn, sets a fertile setting for a wide variety of crops to grow, including bananas, cocoa, coffee, and sugar. Many households must buy more food than they can produce, and Guatemala, unfortunately, lacks the proper infrastructure to be able to transport the goods that are being grown, to markets. A majority of foods are served and cooked with many different spices on breakfast, lunch, or dinner meals, and the meat there can be cooked and served differently as well, sometimes with the legs still attached to the body.

Jobs can be tough to find in Guatemala if you are a foreigner, however, those who temporarily reside in a country for some time that are not born there, are in rather high demand in different areas such as tourism, volunteer work, and communication. The service and agriculture sector of Guatemala employs about 40% of the labor force there, followed by construction, and manufacturing. However, there are many barriers people face in getting a job in this country. There is a lot of cultural violence still alive in the workplace due to the civil war that Guatemala experienced from 1960-1996, working conditions do not always correspond to the standards that the government has set, and conditions such as poor land and soil, no access to credit, overuse of forests, and lack of agricultural tools make it harder for a community to survive.

Since Guatemala is a third world country and 54% of its population resides below the poverty line, there are many necessities and things not available to them. Kids here do not have access to an affordable, quality education, which is why literacy rates are so high. Teachers lack basic materials, resources, and training to equip them to be able to teach their students, which results in about 90% of kids never graduating high school, and 33% of indigenous adults that cannot read or write. In terms of healthcare, public health services are free to all citizens but are extremely underutilized, due to their location in the heart of heavy gang areas, and services they may not provide. For example, secondary sources such as radiology and blood work are deployed to private companies, and with the limited public resources, private resources are the only option to turn to, but the price is way out of many price ranges. In terms of basic necessities, about 91% of Guatemalans have access to improved drinking water, which is an increase of 14 points since MDGs, Millennium Development Goals, that seek to reduce poverty and put the interests of human development and social issues at the center of underdeveloped countries progress. However, half of the people in Guatemala lack access to improved sanitation, and only 5% of the sewage being produced is treated. This could cause many health issues if the sewage leaks into drinking water sources, affects the overall hygiene of the people there, and could cause premature mortality. About 94.7% of the population has access to electricity, and a modern telephone network reaches a majority of the country. Even though most places are easily reached by car in this area, only about 19 in 1000 people have them because they are most likely too expensive. Local markets for produce and food are also very accessible and easy to reach, and a majority of people go there to get what they need.

Although malnutrition is a major issue here, conflict and gang violence among different groups and criminal organizations remain a serious threat and issue for the people who live there and those visiting. Guatemala has one of the highest crime rates in Central America and continues to experience a positive trend of this over the past year. There has been a slight downward dip in the trend line but still remains as one of the most dangerous countries in the world. Guatemala has been assessed at Level 2, which means that travelers should reconsider travel here and be increasingly cautious of their surroundings and belongings while visiting or staying here. Sexual assault cases can be far greater against foreigners who visit here due to their lack of awareness in a different place that is not their own. It has also been assessed by the US Department of State as “CRITICAL,” because theft and robbery are more common against

citizens of the US and can be directed at or affecting the interests of the US government. Guatemala is situated between some of the largest drug-producing countries in South America, and the largest consumer of illegal drugs, the US, this is a big contributor to the conflict experienced here. The abundance of weapons certain groups possess, the presence of certain organized crime groups and gangs, endemic poverty, and the longstanding history of some societal conflicts, all contribute to violent crime in Guatemala.

Even though gang violence and conflict affect all people in the area, women are more affected by economic violence. Since women in this area are not financially independent and have a lower income, they tend to stay in this situation of violence because there are not many other options for them to be able to continue to bring in food and provide for their family, and their husbands refuse to provide for them even though the law requires this. Men are also very much affected by gang violence and many times are targeted by their background, who they may know, actions they have committed, family ties, randomly, etc. These groups will publish a list of names of people who they no longer want in the village, and if they do not leave within 24 hours, they are executed. The youth also experience a handful of gang-related problems and possibly become involved if they believe it is in their best interest or lack better judgment and join regardless. They drop out of school at young ages, face economic hardships, unemployment, teen parenthood, and alcohol and substance abuse as adults as a result of their actions to become involved in this.

Gang violence also affects marginalized populations because this growing violence is one of the main causes of cross-border movement for refugees. The government uses physical and physiological violence against the general population and uses sexual violence as a weapon of war to encourage displacement during the civil war. Indigenous peoples try to improve their current condition however bad it might be, to avoid having to leave and the cultural attachment they feel to their heritage and their previous lands. If they leave, they lose their network of connections and the sense of safety they feel in their current spot. As well as the physical problems it causes, gang violence also affects the environment. War explosives and remnants of them can pollute soils and water with metals and toxins, and also restrict access to different agricultural lands. Drug residue can also enter different water streams and drinking sources in the process of manufacturing them. When humans digest and metabolize them, they excrete small amounts of their waste that end up in the sewage system, and when the waste travels through this treatment system, it could end up in the water supply.

A more liveable wage could be the answer that many are looking for in order to improve food security in this area. The legislation made by the government would encourage businesses to provide a liveable wage, thus creating more incentive to not be in a gang and go and make money to be able to provide for their families. This would allow more room for sustainable jobs to pop up and more hands-on jobs, such as farming, sharecropping, etc. to grow and be available. However, their products would cost more and might not be competitive in the world market overall. Since there has not been as great of an investment in small-scale agriculture, food production has slowed, causing a lack of food in the area. People cannot buy enough food for their families because they simply can't afford it due to the extremely low wages they make. This is why malnutrition is so high in Guatemala, and providing a more liveable wage for the people would seek to solve this issue of food security for many families. This would ultimately help the rest of the people in that area, creating a safer town where hard work and less conflict are present, cutting the chains on food security due to gangs.

An improved education overall and more specifically, quality of the education at a lower price would be a huge factor in limiting gang violence and ultimately food security. By allowing young kids to go to school to learn and grow in knowledge, leaves them with an actual purpose and prevents more young kids from dropping out to join gangs, and falling victim to violence in the town at such a young age. This would overall help the country and the people, creating less violence on the streets and fewer gangs

occupying territory where needed food from families is. Kids would not be so inclined to naturally join a gang to be able to support their family and their life if they had a real education with real knowledge being passed to them. Although it would be more expensive for the country or the United Nations to be able to supply teachers with the necessary materials, education background, and a place to learn that is safe, this would be well worth the money and every penny spent would be put to good use. We as a government in the United States should also apply pressure to help implement this project because those that are more fortunate, see the effects that drug and gang violence has on kids, women, men, etc., and how that affects food security, and by putting this plan in action, this would benefit a majority of the people in the country. By getting the surrounding community involved and excited for these young kids, could also help play a big role in motivating kids to actually go to school, to see the support system they have around them, and the many strangers who would want them to succeed and have a better chance at a better life.

Since Guatemala is among the top producers of illegal drugs, making drugs legal could be a promising solution. By encouraging the legal business of drugs, the country could decriminalize production, encourage private businesses to invest, generate taxes, and create more jobs. A majority of Guatemala's jails are overcrowded with people who are doing their time for drug-related crimes. That has created a situation where jails have become the source of new gang members. Making drugs legal would drastically decrease the number of people who are in jail for drug-related crimes, and instead, keep the people in there who have committed far worse crimes. This would slow the formation of many gangs, which would open lands that were once held by drug lords. People would be able to leave their house in peace to gather food for their family, knowing there is not as high of a chance of getting killed or robbed at gunpoint while out doing so. A potential downside could be an increase in drug use by citizens. But overall, this would ultimately help the people get their lands back as they once were.

Although these solutions would not meet all the issues that are present in this country, they would definitely improve the overall status of the country and would solve a majority of the problems. This project could be funded mainly by the government of Guatemala by encouraging businesses to provide a more liveable wage, improving the education of the youth in the country so not as many of them fall victim to gang affiliation, and private businesses investing in legalizing drugs in the area so not as many people ended up in jail from drug-related crimes, which is where a majority of gangs are formed. The Global Partnership for Education could possibly fund this education project because they try to increase the number of kids attending school and the outcome of this, by funding developing countries with different resources such as aid organizations, the private sector, many donors, and other policy experts. The government has the duty to fund most of these projects and solutions to ensure its citizens are on a better path from where they are currently headed, and I think implementing these solutions, would help a majority of people. The community members of the area and other small businesses or organizations could also help in implementing these solutions by gaining support from the community and getting on board with them, to better the younger generation so they can grow up and not fall victim to violence, and to keep the older generation and everyone in between on the right track, or redirect their life as well so they too are not stuck in this endless cycle forever.

Since there is such a big presence of gangs in this area and gang affiliation, this needs to be heavily considered as well while developing these solutions. Most people would not get up and leave their gang at first glance, so this needs to be a factor that should be taken into account, and possible ways we could make our argument more convincing. I fully believe that providing as good of quality education as possible for the people of Guatemala would improve the situation of many people with gang violence and conflict affecting food security. By being able to provide children with a place to learn, some teachers to be trained or volunteers to teach the kids, and materials so they can learn, all funded by the government or different organizations.

Although the “Land of the Eternal Spring,” nicknamed by many, is a country of beauty, filled with mountainous regions and lined by coasts, Guatemala has its share of problems, gang violence being one of the most life-threatening. A secondary problem is malnutrition. But these problems can be solved if the government focuses on education, legalizing drugs, and providing workers with a more livable wage. Education, if it became the central focus, would help in all these areas, as it would prepare future generations for better jobs and a life free from gangs and violence.

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