



GUATEMALA

Fact Sheet



Land and People:

- The **northernmost** of the Central American nations, Guatemala is the size of Tennessee.
- Its neighbors are Mexico on the north and west, and Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador on the east.
- Guatemala has a population of approximately **12.3 million** people.
- Mestizos known as **Ladinos** in Central America, (mixed Amerindian-Spanish ancestry) and people of European descent (primarily of Spanish) comprise **60%** of the population while **Amerindians** comprise approximately **40%**.
- The **literacy rate** comes to 71% (2003 est.)
- The predominant religion is **Roman Catholicism**. **Protestantism** and traditional **Mayan** religions are practiced by an estimated 33% and 1% of the population, respectively.
- Although the official language is **Spanish**, it is not universally spoken among the indigenous population, or is often spoken as a second language; 21 distinct **Mayan languages** are still spoken, especially in rural areas.

History:

- Once the site of the impressive **ancient Mayan civilization**, Guatemala was **conquered by Spanish conquistador** Pedro de Alvarado in 1524 and became a **republic in 1839** after the United Provinces of Central America collapsed.
- After **Gen. Jorge Ubico's** overthrow in 1944 by the "**October Revolutionaries**," a group of left-leaning students and professionals, liberal-democratic coalitions led by **Juan José Arévalo** (1945–1951) and **Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán** (1951–1954) instituted **social and political reforms** that strengthened the peasantry and urban workers at the expense of the military and big landowners. **With covert U.S. backing, Col. Carlos Castillo Armas led a coup in 1954, and ousted Arbenz, who took refuge in Mexico.**
- A series of **repressive regimes** followed, and by 1960 the country was plunged into a **civil war** between **military governments**, right-wing vigilante groups, and **leftist rebels** that would last 36 years, the **longest civil war** in Latin American history.
- In 1977, the U.S. Carter Administration cut off military aid to the country for a brief time because of its egregious **human rights abuses**. The indigenous Mayan Indians were singled out for special brutality by the right-wing death squads. By the end of the war, **200,000** citizens were dead.
- A succession of **military juntas dominated** during the civil war, until a new constitution was passed and civilian **Marco Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo** was elected and took office in 1986.
- In 1993, Serrano moved to dissolve Congress and the Supreme Court and suspend constitutional rights, but the **military deposed Serrano** and allowed the inauguration of Ramiro de Leon Carpio, the former attorney general for human rights.
- A **peace agreement** was finally signed in Dec. **1996** by President **Álvaro Arzú Irigoyen**.

- In 1999, a Guatemalan truth commission **blamed the army for 93% of the atrocities** and the **rebels** (the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit) for 3%. The former guerrillas apologized for their crimes, and President Clinton later apologized for U.S. support of the right-wing military governments. **The army has not acknowledged its guilt.**
 - Alfonso Portillo Cabrera, closely associated with the former dictatorship of Efraín Ríos Montt (1982–1983), became president in Jan. 2000.
 - In the runoff election in December 2003, conservative **Oscar Berger** was elected president.
 - In 2004, Guatemala experienced an alarmingly violent **crime wave**. More than 2,000 murders took place, which were blamed on crime gangs and bands of teenagers.
 - In 2005, the government ratified a free-trade agreement (**CAFTA**) with the U.S.
-

Politics:

The politics of Guatemala takes place in a framework of a **presidential representative democratic republic**, whereby the president of Guatemala is both **head of state** and **head of government**, and of a pluriform multi-party system. Executive power is exercised by the president. Legislative power is vested in both the president and the Congress of the Republic. The Judiciary is independent of the executive and the legislature.

Economy:

- The **agricultural sector** accounts for one **quarter of GDP** (GDP 2005 est.: \$62.97 billion; per capita \$5,200; Real growth rate: 3.1%)., two-thirds of exports, and half of the labor force. **Coffee, sugar, and bananas** are the main exports (exports 2005 est.: \$3.94 billion f.o.b.). Manufacturing and construction account for one-fifth of GDP.
 - The signing of the peace accords that ended the decades-long civil war removed a major obstacle to foreign investment.
 - Remaining challenges include beefing up government revenues, negotiating further assistance from international donors, and increasing the efficiency and openness of both government and private financial operations.
 - To stimulate the economy, Guatemala, along with El Salvador and Honduras, signed a **free trade agreement** with Mexico in June 2000. In Aug. 2001, plans for tax increases prompted widespread, and often violent, protests.
 - In 2005, despite massive street protests, Guatemala's congress ratified **CAFTA** (the Dominican Republic- Central American Free Trade Agreement between several Central American nations and the U.S.
-

Human Rights:

- Guatemala's 36-year armed conflict ended in 1996. The goal of the December 1996 Peace Accords was a state based on the rule of law, but today Guatemala continues to be crushed by the **rule of impunity**, as well as **extreme social inequality**, and one of the **highest levels of violent crime** anywhere in Latin America.
- Since President **Óscar Berger** came to office in January 2004, thousands of rural families in Guatemala have been **evicted from their homes**. Most of them had been occupying land to protest against violations of their labor rights or were living on land where **ownership was disputed**. During many evictions, **security forces** used excessive force, resulting in beatings and other ill-treatment, the **destruction of homes**

and property, and, in some cases, **killings**. The evictions have also been marked by inadequate provision of basic safeguards, including alternative housing and food. In some cases, those being evicted also resorted to violence, resulting in deaths and injuries on both sides.

-In the case of **labor protection** the Peace Accords (1996) state that the government will "ensure that labor legislation is effectively applied in rural areas" and will pay "urgent attention to the abuses to which rural migrant workers, casual workers and day laborers are victim." In 2003, the UN Special Rapporteur (Reporter) on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Indigenous Peoples noted that, in Guatemala, basic rules relating to pay, security of employment or working conditions for rural workers **fell short of international standards**. He added that the situation had not improved since before the internal armed conflict.



IRTF:InterReligious Task Force on Central America
3606 Bridge Ave, Cleveland OH 44113
216.961.0003
www.irtfcleveland.org