

Guatemalan massacre victims defy state of siege

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Members of the Mayan K'iche group blocked the Interamericana highway after a weekend massacre in which four children 'were chopped up with machetes' [Johan Ordonez/AFP]

Guatemala City, December 22 (RHC)-- Hundreds of Indigenous people defied a state of siege on Tuesday and blocked a major road in Guatemala's west for the second successive day, demanding the government resolve a bloody century-old land dispute.

On Monday, members of the Mayan K'iche group blocked the Interamericana highway with the caskets of 11 of the 13 victims of a weekend massacre in which four children aged between five and 16 "were

chopped up with machetes.”

“The people want peace and tranquillity and an immediate solution, because all that we’re asking for is a border,” said Francisco Tambriz, 51, a community leader from the Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan municipality that is in conflict with the neighbouring Nahuala. “Santa Catarina is crying blood,” said Tambriz.

Although both communities are K’iche, they have been fighting over land – at times violently – for more than 100 years.

On Friday night, armed men with “high-calibre” weapons ambushed a group of people from Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan who went to the village of Chiquix in Nahuala to pick corn. The children were cut into pieces and the victims were then burned inside the truck they were travelling in.

A police vehicle was also attacked, leaving one officer dead and two injured. The Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan community claims those in Nahuala have stolen some of their land.

Late on Monday, President Alejandro Giammattei declared a month-long state of siege in the two communities, which means demonstrations and the right to carry weapons are banned. “These events are no longer the product of an ancestral land conflict. They are the direct consequence of an illegal armed and organised group that acted against civilians and security forces through an ambush,” said Giammattei. And he pledged to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Three men carrying M16 rifles were arrested on Sunday. Authorities said they would carry out forensic tests on the weapons to see if they were used in the massacre.

Protesters blocked the Interamericana – one of Guatemala’s main highways, which links the capital to the west – with tyres, tree trunks, rocks and concrete blocks. A committee of residents has travelled to Guatemala City to meet officials to try to set a legal border between the two communities.

In May 2020, Giammattei also declared a state of siege and installed a roundtable to negotiate a solution, but the Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan community said the initiative failed. “We don’t want any more deaths, we don’t want any more violence. We are looking for peace and justice,” said a man at the roadblock who identified himself only as Diego.

Indigenous people, many living in poverty, make up more than 40 percent of Guatemala’s almost 17 million population, according to official statistics.

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