



Press Release

Cristosal Suspends Operations in El Salvador Amid Escalating Repression

Guatemala City, July 17, 2025. After 25 years of defending human rights in El Salvador, Cristosal announces it is suspending its operations in the country in response to the escalating criminalization of human rights defenders, the imposition of the Russian style Foreign Agents Law (LAEX), and the weakening of institutional independence. Our work will continue, reorganized and committed, from our offices in Guatemala and Honduras.

The regime of President Nayib Bukele, abetted by his brothers, has dismantled the basic principles of democracy. Under a permanent state of exception and with near-total control over all institutions, El Salvador has ceased to be a state governed by the rule of law. Today, expressing an opinion or demanding basic rights can land you in jail. Freedom of expression, peaceful protest, and civic participation have become acts punished and restricted by those in power.

According to the latest survey from the Central American University's Institute of Public Opinion, nearly, nearly 60% of the population is afraid to speak out or protest for fear of reprisals. This culture of fear—fueled by rumors of blacklists, surveillance, intimidating police visits, and arbitrary detentions—functions as a mechanism of social control. As Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chávez warned: "Fear has taken hold in the country."

The arrest of our colleague Ruth López, lawyer and human rights defender, is not an isolated case but part of a broader strategy of exemplary punishment meant to intimidate. Ruth is imprisoned for demanding transparency and denouncing corruption. Like her, many others have been criminalized for their work or forced into exile.

Cristosal has faced legal and administrative harassment, spying, surveillance of its activities and staff homes, as well as defamation campaigns. While this adverse context is not new, this is the first time there are no guarantees of legal defense in El Salvador. On top of this, the Foreign Agents Law (LAEX), is an authoritarian tool that imposes arbitrary sanctions, punitive taxes, and state monitoring to censor and punish independent organizations.

Faced with this scenario of growing authoritarian consolidation, we were forced to make the painful decision to suspend our operations in El Salvador. We do so to protect our team—people who have had to leave their country to keep defending rights—safeguard our work, and ensure that the defense of human rights remains alive. Our mission continues.

Cristosal does not renounce its legal status or its commitment to El Salvador. We have registered under the Foreign Agents Law because the defense of human rights is non-negotiable.

We are reorganizing to protect our voices and ensure that human rights defense remains alive, free, and at the service of victims. For over 25 years, we have stood alongside those facing abuse of power, and we will continue to do so. For Ruth López, for Alejandro Henríquez, for José Ángel Pérez, for Enrique Anaya, for every victim of the Bukele brothers regime, for every silenced or disappeared person, for every mother still waiting for justice: Cristosal will not stop. It continues. Freer. Firmer. More necessary than ever.