



# The Right Livelihood Award

*for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people*

Helen Mack Chang (Guatemala)

(1992)



*for her personal courage and persistence in seeking justice and an end to the impunity of political murderers.*

Helen Mack Chang

Born in 1952, Helen Mack Chang is a business administrator who has dedicated a large portion of her life to socially-oriented, non-profit educational and housing projects in Guatemala. Her life suddenly changed in September 1990 when her sister, Myrna Mack, a social anthropologist who studied the problems of people displaced by the internal armed conflict in the country, was brutally assassinated by a military commando.

Certain that her sister's death was a political crime, Helen Mack insisted on investigating and seeking to bring to justice those responsible, even though impunity for this type of crime was - and continues to be - the norm in Guatemala. The case went before 12 different judges, many of whom were threatened or corrupted, but after overcoming numerous obstacles the soldier convicted of direct responsibility for the murder was sentenced to 30 years in prison. During the trial, the police investigator who provided the main evidence for the prosecution was himself assassinated.

The judicial process led to much harassment, persecution and many death threats for Helen Mack. Despite this she has persevered in seeking to bring to justice those who gave the orders for her sister's assassination. By early 1999, three high-ranking military officers - a General and two Colonels - stood accused on this count and were due to face a public trial. It is the first time in the history of the Guatemalan justice system that the intellectual authors of a crime will have been brought to court.

Mack's extraordinary courage in the fight against impunity has brought her wide renown. Her struggle has been supported by a wide spectrum of Guatemalan society and by thousands of citizens who are following in her footsteps in the search for justice. After receiving the Right Livelihood Award, she created the Myrna Mack Foundation to pursue research, analysis, training and other activities to defeat impunity and defend human rights. The Foundation provides training programmes for judges, lawyers, academics and community leaders.

According to Kerry Kennedy Cuomo, executive director of the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center

for Human Rights in New York: "Helen has become a symbol of the struggle against impunity in Guatemala. Many Guatemalans now have the faith to challenge the impunity of perpetrators of political crimes and admire Helen for her brave and persistent efforts to promote justice and human rights."

In addition to presiding over the Myrna Mack Foundation and acting as the accuser in the trial against the military officers, Helen Mack has been a member of the Commission for the Strengthening of Justice, which makes recommendations for reform of the judicial system including measures against impunity. She has participated as an expert witness in cases of human rights violations before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the Organisation of American States, among other charges. She has also been a promoter of the strategic planning projects "Guatemalan Vision" and "Visualising a Guatemala of the 21st century". As of 2011, she is coordinator of the Commission for the Police Reform.

Helen Mack Chang received the Notre Dame Award by Public Service in Latin America in 2005, the Human Rights Award from the King of Spain in 2006, and several other significant recognitions.

### **Quotation**

*"We are putting on trial the policy of terror in Guatemala of the past 30 years... We are not looking for reprisals but for justice... What we want is justice as proof that governmental arbitrariness will not continue; justice as a condition for the development of democratic relations free of fear and coercion."*

Helen Mack Chang

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