

Rights Action

www.rightsaction.org • September 2003

ON THE ROAD with RIGHTS ACTION • July – August, 2003

Dear friends,

Greetings. I wrote this newsletter during a five-week trip to Guatemala and Honduras, July 4 – August 8. This provides you with an overview of some of the issues we are dealing with and some of the community-based projects and organizations that Rights Action (RA) supports.

At every step of the way, it is increasingly clear that getting funds to the right people and projects is a crucial element of the work for sane and healthy development. Thank-you for your trust and financial support. I would be pleased to receive your comments and questions.

Grahame Russell, co-director



PHOTO BY JONATHAN MOLLER – JONAS@IGC.ORG

JULY 4-6: Guatemala City

As always, I began my trip to Chiapas and Central America on a retreat with Annie Bird, my co-director. We catch up on all issues, from staffing and organizational issues, to global economic, military and political factors impacting negatively on the lives of people in the region. We have been co-directors for 8 years; there is always too much to discuss.

JULY 7: Sword is mightier than the pen

In our Guatemala City office, journalist Luis Barillas slumps in a chair. Out front, police 'stand guard'. Luis has been assigned protection after bombs were thrown in his house on July 4. Who are the police protecting? Spying for? We talk of exile – Luis should leave the country, his family, community and friends. He shakes and cries. In two days, I sit again with Luis, in his home town of Rabinal. He slumps further, more fear in his eyes. His sister received a death threat under her door. With words cut from newspapers, the grotesque scrabble board of letters said that if she did not get her brother – Luis – to shut up then her children would be murdered! Normal in a place like Guatemala. There are many places like Guatemala in the global south, regimes and oligarchies kept in place by political, military and economic actors from the global north.

JULY 8: Instituto Mixto Nueva Esperanza, Rio Negro, 13 de Marzo, 1982

I drive in our pickup to Rabinal, in the Baja Verapaz mountains of Guatemala. In the 1980s, Rabinal was a place of genocide. For centuries, it has been a place of exploitation and discrimination against the Maya-Achi population. East of Rabinal, a rough dirt road leaves town, getting bumpier and narrower, a path for horses, campesinos and cows. Soon many children will pass this way on their way to school. The Instituto, conceived and planned by Jesus Tecu Osorio, will be built on a piece of land that the Fundacion Nueva Esperanza has purchased. Jesus is an eye-witness to and survivor of genocide. Every project RA supports in this region – a carpentry clinic, exhumations, monuments, education programs, legal cases,

THANK YOU!

In 2003, we have transferred \$600,000 of your funds directly to our partner organizations in Honduras, Chiapas, Nicaragua and Peru.



PHOTO BY JONATHAN MOLLER

micro-loan funds, agricultural development, a community museum – has been spear-headed and implemented by genocide survivors.

“The Institute owns the land from this wall of trees to that pine tree way over there,” Jesus points, “and from the path right up almost to the top of the mountain ridge.” I stare in wonder, thinking of all that Jesus lost. Now, Jesus is creating a place for children, to form better people who will build more just communities and a more just global society, from the bottom up.

The name tells a story. Instituo Mixto means middle school. Nueva Esperanza means new hope. Rio Negro is the name of the village of Jesus Tecu Osorio that was destroyed in the ‘scorched earth’ campaigns of the 1980s, in part to make way for the Chixoy Dam funded by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. March 13, 1982, is the day soldiers and patrollers massacred 107 children and 70 women, including the family – except one sister – of Jesus.

Since 1993, Jesus has worked with other local leaders for justice for the crimes of the past, for the exhumation and reburial of the remains of their murdered loved ones, for community healing and re-building, including education. Here, the project will unfold: school buildings, dormitories, an orchard, a vegetable garden, corn fields, coffee plants, sports areas, hiking trails, and more. Some of the most discriminated and oppressed children of the Americas will receive an education that will teach Maya-Achi language, culture and community values; teach the real history of Guatemala; and teach the importance of education and preparation to make one’s way forward, in benefit of one’s community, in a complicated and troubled world.

GENOCIDE SURVIVORS RUN EX-GENERAL OUT OF RABINAL

“Assassin, Assassin, we don’t want you here.” Repeating this, family members of genocide victims forced their way into a meeting being held by former Guatemala general Rios Montt, actually the most powerful politician in Guatemala: president of the National Congress of Guatemala, leader of the ruling FRG party, and now presidential candidate.

In May, genocide survivors from Rabinal announced that on June 13-14, they would re-bury the remains of their loved ones that had been recently exhumed from mass graves. On June 8, the FRG announced a political rally for June 14 in Rabinal, and that Rios Montt would be the featured speaker! Filled with anger and pain, the genocide survivors carried the tiny caskets, filled with skeletal remains of their loved ones, to the rally. When the shoving and rock throwing was done, Rios Montt – who was hit by a rock that drew blood – was whisked away from the demonstration, not able to give his speech.

“INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY” AND IMPUNITY

For all the massacres, disappearances, torture, rape and genocide that Rios Montt is partially responsible for, someone finally hit him on the head, drawing a trickle of blood! Twenty years after he headed the military government of Guatemala, backed by the “international community” (USA, Canada, other western governments, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, global companies and banks, etc.), Rios Montt is still

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the most powerful politician in Guatemala. Just as 20 years ago, the “international community” today has beneficial commercial, financial and military relations with the government of Guatemala. Rios Montt is an accepted leader in the international community. Not even a dent has been made in the impunity of the powerful sectors that commit human rights violations and acts of corruption with impunity.

As an admission of the failure of the Guatemalan “peace” process, an international commission – CICIACS (Commission to Investigate Illegal Bodies and Clandestine Security Apparatuses) – will begin its work in September. Notwithstanding the work of CICIACS, the sincerity of the “international community” about repression and impunity in Guatemala must be questioned. To date, Rios Montt has gotten away scott-free for his role in the genocide. But for a few poor, Mayan ex-civil defense patrollers in jail, this is true for all the political, military and economic leaders of Guatemala, who supported *and benefited* from the genocide and repression.

And so the most discriminated victims of the genocide and repression in Baja Verapaz took it on themselves to remind the world that Rios Montt is an ex-military leader who helped plan and carry out repression and genocide against the Mayan majority of Guatemala. That the “international community” could be so honest.



PHOTO BY JONATHAN MOLLER

JULY 9-16: COPINH, Civic Council of Indigenous and Popular Organizations (La Esperanza, Intibuca, Honduras)

I drive through the dry mountains of western Honduras, to meet up with COPINH (2002 recipient of the Body Shop HR Award, as nominated by RA) that is planning 3 popular forums. (See below) I meet up also with Jessica Pupovac and Sandra Cuffe, both working with RA, who are supporting COPINH: human rights accompaniment, writing articles and urgent actions, etc.

JULY 11: La Granja Jail, Gracias, Department of Lempira

Across the Americas, under-funded, over-crowded jails are filled with poor people who committed petty crimes, gang members who commit lots of violent crimes, and political prisoners who are usually poor people who fight for the rights of their communities and then get stuck in jail on false charges. Marcelino and Leonardo Miranda are two such political prisoners – brothers of Lenca descent from the community of Montana Verde. On January 8, 2003, they were brutally detained and stuck in the Gracias jail. In April, 2003, they were beaten in their jail cell – torture for the sake of it, and to send a message to community leaders. Marcelino and Leonardo received us today, with smiles, still no trial. “No, since April they have not beaten us.”

Montana Verde has been under siege by local land owners since 1986 who want the land for its wood, cattle grazing, water sources and minerals. The people of Montana Verde have resisted the violent pressures. “And yet we know that these pressures will not go away,” Marcelino says, and talks of the need for community education and unity.

Legal and political efforts to release Marcelino and Laureano continue. Marcelino Martinez, an over-worked, underpaid lawyer, is on the case, even as he has charges of sedition pending against him. These charges also are false and abusive. In Honduras, the legal and penal systems are used as part of the tools of domination and repression.

After talking 2 hours, we leave the jail with Marcelino’s wife and son. They awoke at 1am, hiked 5 hours out to the road, hopped a truck for 2 more hours. They will now hop on a bus that will take them towards Montana Verde; then they will hike 5 hours back home, to their beautiful land, poverty and isolation, to their resolve to resist the illegal incursions and bring education, health and transportation services to improve the well-being of the whole community.

GLOBALIZATION FROM BELOW – POPULAR FORUMS IN LA ESPERANZA

Like genocide survivors throwing stones at Rios Montt, to try and put an end to impunity, the people of COPINH are meeting night and day to plan popular forums that they are hosting in La Esperanza, to help put an end to the impunity of global and national economic

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actors. A thousand people from Central America and Mexico will be here July 17-21 to help build globalization from below, discussing alternative development projects.

Across the Americas, there is an empowering movement growing, against great obstacles (like impoverishment, racism and repression). Popular, cross-border forums are being planned by NGOs and community organizations to educate and mobilize people about the wide range of global-to-local issues. The popular forums being planned for La Esperanza are:

- 1 The Second Global Forum Against Dams, July 17. Over 40 million people have been displaced across the planet by hydroelectric dams projects managed by corporations and financed by international development giants such as the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank. Many of the displaced suffered repression, sometimes massacres; those who survive are forced to abandon land that their people have inhabited for generations. In this forum, people will share their stories and plan resistance and alternatives to the mega hydro-electric dams.
- 2 The Third Forum for Cultural and Biological Diversity, July 18-19, will address the threat that the neo-liberal model of development poses to ecosystems and cultures. The topics range from bio-piracy, to genetically modified foods, to the rights of indigenous peoples. This forum seeks to approach these issues from a regional and global manner, focusing on shared experiences and resistance strategies.

COPINH meetings end late. Planning is hard. COPINH is under-funded. Most people working are volunteers; most people coming to the Foros can't afford to come! And yet it is the very bringing together of people from different countries and regions that is crucial to educating and training enough people – despite on-going impoverishment, racism and repression – to create the people/political force necessary to implement community focused and controlled alternatives to the reigning development order.

- 3 4th Mesoamerican Forum for the Self-Determination and Resistance of the People, July 22-24, Tegucigalpa. On July 21, participants will travel to Tegucigalpa for a protest in honor of Lempira, the indigenous, anti-colonialist leader. Then participants will critically look at the Central American Free Trade Agreement, the Free Trade Area of the Americas and Plan Puebla-Panamá, working towards a popular response to the 5th Conference of the WTO in Cancún, México, September 2003.

JULY 14: COFADEH & A Drop of Justice

PHOTO BY JONATHAN MOLLER



Headline news: The Inter-American Court of Human Rights found the Honduran government guilty, 12 years later, of torturing, disappearing and murdering a young campesino – Juan Humberto Sanchez. I am in the office of COFADEH (Comite de Familiares de Desaparecidos de Honduras) that carried the case forward. Juan – a campesino – was from the western region of Honduras. He worked the family plot. On orders from the Honduran military structure, he was kidnapped and murdered, his body found days later, rotting in the Rio Negro. Impunity marks Honduras' political and legal systems. Yet the family members and COFADEH persevered and won, an exception to the rule.

JULY 14: Incessant Globalization from Above

Representatives of the ENERSA energy company came to the offices of COPINH to inform that they were going to the Montana Verde region to explore the possibility of building hydro-electric dams and explore the mining potential. There has been (again) no consultation with the local community that is still engaged in land battles; still trying to get their community members, Marcelino and Leonardo, out of jail. Now, there are more potential problems to undermine community development. Or the same problems? Do the landowners have interests in ENERSA?

July 18-23: Chixoy Dam Reparations Campaign, Guatemala

I spend 5 days with COHRE, the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions, that is carrying out an investigation into the Chixoy Dam hydro-electric project and the responsibility of the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank to compensate and provide reparations to the survivors of the Rio Negro community and other forcibly displaced communities.

Twenty years after the completion of this project, the WB and IDB are in denial about what a disaster the project was, including the massacres of over 444 Rio Negro villagers. With surviving community members, we are pressuring the Banks and Guatemalan government, to provide compensation and reparations. We are not holding our breath. Over the 5 days, COHRE and RA:

- ▶ Met with Rio Negro survivors in the resettlement community of Pacux, built in 1982 with WB and IDB funds as a military controlled “model village”
- ▶ Spent the night in the remains of the isolated Rio Negro community itself, to where 15 families have moved back. Their spirit of survival, community and regeneration is remarkable
- ▶ Met with World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank officials in Guatemala City and with national and international NGOs working for justice in this case



PHOTO BY JONATHAN MOLLER

A WALK BACK IN TIME

From the slowly-being-rebuilt community of Rio Negro, on the edge of the Chixoy Dam basin, 200 meters up the slope from where the community used to be (before massacres and dam basin flooding), we hike up the same path that close to 200 women and children were forced-marched on March 13, 1982, to their deaths, in the name of the battle against “communism”. High above the community, we arrive at the old Conacaste tree where the young women were forced to dance with their soon-to-be killers (soldiers and patrollers). Here, they began to rape the women and girls. I imagine their voices, the screaming, the fear, terrorized, ... yet so strong today, clamouring from mass graves for justice.

As we hike up and up, Mario and Francisco, survivors recently moved back to Rio Negro, tell us about those terrible years of 1978–1985. They point to mountain crevices where they hid for months after the massacres, surviving on roots and spring water. Many of the elderly and young died of starvation and disease. They point to places, now deep under water, where the ‘so-and-so’ family used to live, where ‘so-and-so’ used to keep his cattle,

WHAT TO DO

Many times I have stood with massacre survivors and as they describe their reaction when, a day or so after the massacres, they came upon the remains of their family and community members – dumped in a well, burnt en masse in someone’s hut, thrown in a ravine, The person recounting their story always looks off into space and says “No hallamos que hacer en la vida”, At that moment I didn’t know what to do in my life.

JULY 24: Black Thursday

RA is about to initiate a 13 day Human Rights Legal Activism Seminar, with lawyers, law students and activists. Three participants pull out on the 25th because the streets of Guatemala City are rocked by protests by the ruling FRG party! The governing party has taken to the streets to pressure the Courts to allow ex-General Rios Montt to run for the presidency. We spent the 24th preparing an urgent action, that was distributed on our e-list (info@rightSACTION.org), and supported friends-colleagues at risk of repression. All is calm

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by the afternoon of the 25th. And, of course, Rios Montt got his way. Soon after the brutal protests, the Constitutional Court ruled he could run for the presidency. He will run. More blood will be shed in the coming months, ... ah, years, ... ah, decades.

BEING THERE

After considering the situation of safety and security, my co-director Annie travels with some HR investigators to Rabinal to hold meetings concerning the damage and loss of life caused by the Chixoy Dam project. It is important that we continue to visit with and support our partner groups and friends, even in times of tension. Despite the street protests, our human rights activist seminar gets under way on the 25th, with 8 of the confirmed 11 participants; a good, if not depressing opening lesson of the on-going impunity in Guatemala.

JULY 31: Denese Becker / Dominga Sic Ruiz

Denese Becker, born Dominga Sic Ruiz, is a Mayan-Achi survivor of the Rio Negro massacres. ("Discovering Dominga" is a film just released that documents the life and struggles of Dominga/Denese.) RA has worked with Denese since 2000, when she first reached out, from Algona, Iowa, to reconnect with her home village of Rio Negro. She is now on her 5th trip back to Rio Negro and we discussed the ways to support community development and re-building efforts. Her situation is similar to many Guatemalans, being a massacre survivor, yet so particular, as she has lived, since the age of 11, in Iowa, far from and ignorant of the hard and brutal history of her country. Denese continues taking courageous steps forward, to fully learn about and confront her past and to see justice done for the crimes committed against her family and community.

THE GLOBAL ORDER

In the USA and Canada, "Illegal" immigrants from Latin America work at whatever they have to do, to survive and stay in the country. In Guatemala, many of the young prostitutes, working the dangerous streets, are 15 year old "illegal" immigrant girls from Nicaragua, an even poorer country.

JULY 25–AUGUST 8: Applied Human Rights Seminar-delegation *Indigenous and human rights struggles & organizing*

We successfully complete an intense 2-week activist seminar. The aim is to expose North Americans to development and human rights issues, to focus attention on the actions of global actors (northern governments, companies, banks, financial institutions, etc.) that contribute to impoverishment and repression in the global south, and to discuss how northern lawyers and activists can bring legal and political pressure to bear on the responsibilities of northern actors. Our group was comprised of human rights activists, law students and lawyers. Combining city meetings with overnight stays in isolated rural areas, the group investigated a number of issues that RA is involved with:

- ▶ the genocide cases working their ways slowly, dangerously through the Guatemala courts;
- ▶ the situation of banana workers on a Del Monte plantation. In the past two years, 9 community members have been assassinated;
- ▶ the negative impact of Canadian and US mining companies in the communities of San Ignacio and San Andres de Minas, Honduras, where open pit mining techniques are being used, along with cyanide extraction methods;
- ▶ the human rights violations being suffered, on an on-going basis, by Lenca-campesinos from the isolated Honduran community of Montana Verde, including beatings, torture and illegal jailings for long periods of time;
- ▶ the responsibilities of the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank for 444 deaths and other violations of indigenous and human rights committed during the Chixoy Hydro-electric dam project, 1975-1985;

PHOTO BY JIM SCHRIDER

It is important that we continue to visit with and support our partner groups and friends, even in times of tension.

July 29: Looking Backwards and Forwards in Xesiguan

With our HR Seminar group, we hike early into the Xesiguan community, to attend a ceremony remembering the July 29, 1982 massacre of Xesiguan villagers, when soldiers and patrollers killed everyone in sight, destroying homes and crops. All night, community members participated with their dead loved ones in a Mayan ceremony. This morning, they attend a Catholic service in the school house, again saying the names of their murdered loved ones, invoking their spirits. Lesson for the HR Seminar: the genocide case. Across Guatemala, Mayan communities remember, every year, the massacres that destroyed their communities and lives. As they remember, they gather the strength needed to re-build communities and lives, and to demand justice.

August 2: No Options

We finally get permission to pass by armed guards and enter, with our HR Seminar group, the Del Monte banana plantation to visit the Lanquin Dos community, surviving precariously on the former banana plantation. We drive through rich land that, for generations, has been used not to feed the hungry people of Guatemala, but to put bananas on North American tables. Under a tree, dozens of campesinos meet with us. Few people visit them here on the land they are occupying, fighting with the Company and government for a piece of land. These are family members of workers illegally fired by the Company after Hurricane Mitch in 1998, and then in 2000, when Del Monte decided that it wanted to decrease banana production due to international banana prices, or because they wanted to lease the land to cattle farmers, or ... for any number of reasons that meant that campesinos who had lived and worked on the land all their lives, and the lives of their parents, were out of a low paying job and had to go. Everyone knows there is no where to go.

In the past 2 years, 9 community leaders and activists have been killed! Gregorio Vasquez Vasquez tells of how on February 8, 2003, while resting with his young children, he was awoken by an intruder, Rutilio Cordon, a man that he knew, who had a gun. They wrestled, and Gregorio got the gun from Rutilio, and sent Rutilio away. Then the community called the police, the United Nations human rights mission – MINUGUA – and the government human rights commission, and the Lanquin Dos community formally handed over the gun that Gregorio had wrestled from Rutilio. The gun was traced back to a land-owning family, who got their gun back, and Rutilio lives free today, and the family that hired him to kill Gregorio lives free today, and the Lanquin Dos community members live in fear today. Gregorio concludes: “Los campesinos aquí no valemos nada, ante los ricos y ante la ley.” We campesinos are worth nothing before the law, before the rich.

Across Guatemala, Mayan communities remember, every year, the massacres that destroyed their communities and lives. As they remember, they gather the strength needed to re-build communities and lives, and to demand justice.

August 4: Montana Verde, Honduras

After a two hour drive in a 4x4 pick-up, and a 3 hour hike up and down steep mountain trails, we arrive at the communities of Vertientes and Planes, Montana Verde. Here, for generations, Lenca descendent campesinos have lived peacefully. Here, over the past years, they are under siege from outside interests who are pressuring to get them off this land. An old story line: people with wealth and guns want this land for cattle grazing, for wood, to build hydro-electric dams, or to explore for gold and silver. We have hiked in for the night with representatives of COPINH to have a community meeting; fortunately, the community sent horses to carry our bags, bedding and food, as well as some of us from time to time.

IMPUNITY AND REPRESSION IN PLANES

Night has fallen, in Montana Verde. I stay in the hut of Marta and her family. In the lean-to kitchen, we sit around the “luz electrica” (electric light) as Marta jokes about the little fire place where they cook tortillas,

continued on the following page

PHOTO BY JONATHAN MOLLER



Global Education & Involvement Opportunities

Are you interested in:

- ▶ going on an activist-educational delegation to Mexico, Central America or Peru?
- ▶ being a human rights accompanier in the south?
- ▶ inviting a speaker from Mexico, Central America or Peru to give a public presentation in your community?
- ▶ being on our e-list and newsletter list?

Contact: info@rightsaction.org, 416-654-2074

ON THE ROAD with RIGHTS ACTION

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coffee and meat. Their hut is isolated, as are all rural huts in this region, surrounded by corn fields, lemon and orange trees. They are building a second hut – a tiny house this time – of adobe bricks they are making there on their own property. By the fire-light, they tell me of the night of January 8, 2003, when police and special “Cobra” forces invaded their community at midnight, beat and tortured men, women and children, made infants and elderly lie in the mud, illegally detained Marcelino and Leonardo Miranda, beat them again, and marched away 10 hours later. All the while, the police and Cobras held the rest of the community at bay with machine guns, telling them the same would happen to them if there were any problems.

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