

Rights Action

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GUATEMALA: THE GLOBAL ORDER, INJUSTICE & RESISTANCE

BY GRAHAME RUSSELL

From May 12-19, I traveled in Guatemala with 10 students and their professor from the University of Northern British Columbia (Prince George). We visited Rights Action partner organizations(*), learning first hand of the oppression and resistance struggles that people in Guatemala face ... as a matter of course, as part of their daily fare.

It is increasingly obvious that a global and historical perspective is needed to understand the structural injustices against the majority population in a place like Guatemala—a “national” perspective is not sufficient. What is also needed is an activist vision and agenda aimed at building global alliances—people to people—to end local-to-global injustices ... to create community controlled development and decent living conditions for all. One world, one solution.

(*) With your financial donations, Rights Action funds and works with the community development and human rights organizations and projects mentioned below.



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Taking on genocide & impunity... in the courts, of all places

As much as anything, this trip is about resistance to historical racism, exploitation and repression; it is about efforts to build a healthy community development and a just global order. What better place to begin than by learning of the “genocide cases”.

In the Spring Hotel (Guatemala City), we spoke with Pablo Pons, a lawyer with CALDH, the Center for Human Rights and Legal Action(*), working on the genocide cases, two of the most extraordinary and risky trials in the Americas. These cases are happening in a country where impunity is deeply entrenched, where former generals

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and politicians, who planned and benefited from the “scorched earth” repression against civilians, 1960s—1990s, are still in power today.

Intact—global impunity

We debated why was it that the cases were against the Guatemalan “intellectual authors” of the genocide, but not against officials from other countries—the USA principally, but also Chile, Argentina and Israel—that funded, armed and worked with the Guatemalan forces during the worst years of repression?

The simple answers are: A. Impunity for global actors is still deeply entrenched in the unjust global order; B. It is up to the citizens of those countries to hold their own governments accountable for their actions!

Undermining impunity—under the ground

We walked to the “Hipodromo” in Zone 2, arriving at the offices of the FAFG, the Guatemalan Foundation of Forensic Anthropology(*). Since 1992, Mayan communities across Guatemala have been digging up the mass graves into which their massacred loved ones were unceremoniously dumped; hundreds of mass graves have been dug up, thousands remain.

After speaking with the FAFG director—Jose Suasnavar—and watching a film documenting their work across the country, we spent time in their laboratory where they were carefully cleaning and examining the remains of some victims of the genocide ... recently exhumed.

It is awe-inspiring, to be in such a place, witnessing such moving work. The exhumation process is the most important work related to allowing surviving family members to properly mourn and rebury their loved ones, to break through their fear and silence and tell the truth about how they were brutally

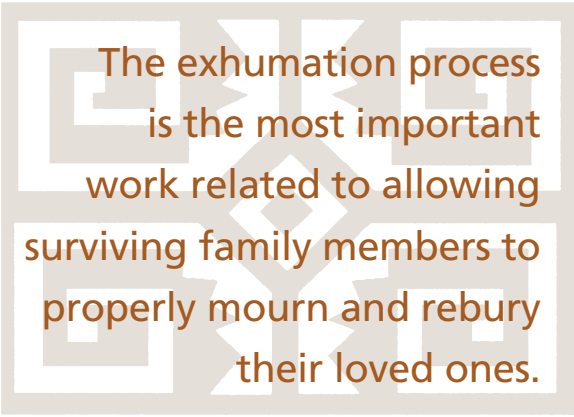
mowed down. The exhumations also provide the most crucial evidence being used in the genocide and other trials.

The past—global impunity intact

Leaving Guatemala City at 6am, we arrived in the town & municipality of Rabinal (Baja Verapaz) by 1130am, a region where the United Nations Truth Commission found (1999) that genocide had been carried out. We went straight to the re-settlement community of Pacux, where the survivors of the four “Rio Negro massacres” live today in difficult conditions of poverty, on-going trauma, joblessness and—worse—landlessness.

We had been invited to witness a Mayan ceremony(*) commemorating the May 14, 1982 massacre of 85 Rio Negro villagers—children and elderly, women and men—in the context of forcibly displacing villagers from Rio Negro, to make way for the Chixoy Hydro-electric Dam, a profitable mega-development project of the World Bank (WB) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB).

Despite participation in the Chixoy Dam Reparations Campaign(*), Rio Negro survivors told us that the WB and the IDB continue to deny any knowledge of the



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massacres of 444 Rio Negro villagers (that occurred in the context of the Chixoy Dam project funded and carried out by them!) and that the village survivors had never received proper compensation or reparations for all that was lost, stolen or destroyed, including lives, livestock, land, homes, crops and personal belongings.

Despite working for 8 years on a legal case(*) against the “material authors” of the March 13, 1982 Rio Negro massacre, to date only three paramilitaries (lowest in the hierarchy of country’s security forces) have been jailed. The military officer in charge of the repression in Rabinal, Capitan Jose Solares, has not been detained, despite an arrest warrant and fact that he travels freely in the country.

Helicopter ride to hell

By the burning incense, at the Pacux ceremony, survivors of the Los Encuentros massacre told of how 15 women and children were taken away that day, May 14, 1982, in an Army helicopter, never to be seen again. They need to know what happened to them. They told us that the soldiers and paramilitaries arrived at Los Encuentros that day in trucks belonging to the WB and IDB funded dam construction project!

The past—being dug up ... happily

After years of activism by local human rights groups, the Army finally closed the Rabinal military outpost. Local activists immediately petitioned for exhumations (*) to be carried out on the former outpost. From Pacux, we walked to an exhumation in progress. Members of the FAFG were methodically digging up an abandoned well. To date, they had exhumed 15 cadavers, and were still digging more than 10 meters down.

Maria Alvarado Tecu, a Maya-Achi woman from a nearby village, told us that she was convinced that finally she would recover the remains of her husband who was illegally captured by the Army in 1982. She was very happy to be there, and happy that we were there with her ... witnessing the unearthing, listening to her testimony.

Monument alley

Across from the former military outpost, we walk to the Rabinal cemetery. Along a 100-yard stretch, we pass monument after monument(*) commemorating the names and lives victims from villages throughout Rabinal. Murals adorn the monuments, depicting how the massacres were carried out. Set in marble, one reads of how soldiers and paramilitaries came into each village to carry out the atrocities ... on such and such a date. Finally, Rabinal villagers have a place to come and speak with their dead.

The present

We walk into the town of Rabinal and meet with ADIVIMA, the Association for the Integral Development of the Maya-Achi Victims of the “Violencia”(*), a local community development group founded by witnesses to and survivors of the genocide.



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ADIVIMA has taken the lead in Rabinal on work related to the exhumations, breaking the silence and fear; building monuments; pursuing legal cases; and re-building mental health and communities.

The future

There are no easy ways to rebound from genocide. So you just get on with it. One Rio Negro survivor is Jesus Tecu Osorio. With funds he received from an international human rights award, he established the FNE (Fundación Nueva Esperanza) education program(*). We drove down a dirt road to the site of a school recently completed. Against the backdrop of genocide and centuries of poverty and discrimination, the school(*) is beautiful ... simply awesome. Mayan Achi children, some the sons and daughters of massacre victims, all poor, are receiving education for the first time. And it is an honest and dynamic bi-lingual, multi-cultural education, not the stale, racist and oppressive education of the under funded Guatemalan education system.

Past ... present ... future

The next morning, Fernando Suazo, a former Catholic priest, talks of the past-present-future of Rabinal ... all is inter-connected. The Mayan people have survived atrocities

since the on-slaught of European imperialism 500 years before; they resist still. The genocide, exploitation and racism of Guatemala—indeed of the Americas—is not recent stuff. It is not over.

From the wall of fear and silence that oppressed Rabinal—indeed much of Guatemala—till recently, there is an explosion of truth telling, breaking down the walls of imposed silence and fear. We walk to the Rabinal Community Museum(*), a grassroots project conceived and started by the genocide survivors. The museum has grown into an extraordinary place of history and education. The

first room has Maya-Achi cultural history on display; the second room is a mini-holocaust museum, with photos of the dead, objects recovered from the mass grave killings sites, and more.

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Cajyup

With Fernando Suazo's history lesson in mind, with the visuals of the Community Museum in our heads, with the smells and chanting of yesterday's Mayan ceremony in Pacux, we hike 90 minutes up a steep hillside above Rabinal, to the remains of a 800 year old Mayan village—Cajyup. A place that reminds that the past is tied to the present; a place with an extraordinary view of much of the Rabinal valley, home to the Maya-Achi people, a place of genocide, survival, resistance and re-building.

El Estor: The *company town*

From Rabinal, it is a 10-hour trip to El Estor (department of Izabal), a “company town” on the north shore of the great Lake Izabal. In Rabinal, we learned of

the roles of the WB, IDB, and US military in much of Guatemala's repression and genocide. In El Estor, we will learn of the 40-year history of the Canadian INCO nickel company and how it impacted negatively on the community development needs and aspirations the Maya-Kekchi people.

El Estor—derived from the English word “store”—was a company town in the 1970s and early 1980s, till INCO mothballed its operation due to high oil prices. INCO—via its Guatemala subsidiary EXMIBAL—is hoping to kick-start mining operations soon again, before its 40-year concession runs out in 2005. The community is again divided—local politicians and business leaders want the company back, the “development” model conceived as a global business investment that will bring economic benefit for a few, and trickle down a bit more from, till the ore is gone ..., or international prices go down ..., or the company can get ore cheaper some where else, or

What kind of “development” opportunity is this top-down business driven model? We talk late into the evening with Dan Vogt, a former Catholic priest and friend to the poor Kekchi communities. He is also a thorn in the side of the local Catholic bishop who got rid of him a few years back, as well as the local business leaders and municipal politicians and INCO company officials. Dan is co-founder of AEPDI (a local, Maya-Kekchi development and rights organization.)(*)



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“Development” equals business

INCO gave us the royal tour of the open-pit mining sites and the ore refining plant. The mayor of the municipality of El Estor was with us step by step. I thought, initially, he was a company employee. After a tour of the mining operations, we sat in an INCO office and listened as the mayor Rigoberto told us how good INCO investments were for the region in the past ..., which made little sense; El Estor is today one of the poorest municipalities in Guatemala. INCO investment was assuredly a good investment for North Americans and it might have been a bonanza for some local and national leaders, but it contributed nothing to creating and strengthening a sustainable local development model. Running a profitable business does not necessarily translate into a good development model; it often undermines the chance of locally controlled, sustainable development.

We asked questions about well documented abuses related to INCO's operations in the 1970s and early 1980s: community social disruption; lack of consultation with local communities; forced relocation of communities; INCO's infamous relationship with the military; repression in Guatemala City against activists and academics criticizing the country's fire sale of mining concessions; repression against local activists in the El Estor region; low profit remittances to the local government; etc.

To each question, INCO and municipal officials made categorical denials. We asked of how the United Nations Truth Commission made particular mention of the harmful and complicit relationship between INCO and the Guatemalan military in the 1970s and 1980s? The INCO and municipal officials complained that the Truth Commission report

was based on lies told by human rights activists who made up stories of conflicts and repression, just so that they can raise funds from international donors!

Yet more concessions

In the afternoon, we drove to Chichipate, a community of Kekchi people who refused to be forcibly displaced by INCO years before. An elderly man spoke to us in Kekchi (then translated from Spanish to English) about how he escaped the 1979 ambush, by 'judiciales' working in concert with the company, an ambush that took the life of his son. No justice was ever done.

Men from other nearby villages spoke of how they just learned, via AEPDI, that their lands had recently been given, without their knowledge, into concession to US and Canadian mining companies. Knowing what INCO had done the first time around, knowing how poverty had remained the same or worsened, knowing of the forced displacements, they were now fearful that the same "development" would be thrust upon their communities and livelihoods.

Cheap banana splits and assassinations

From El Estor, we cross the "great lake"—Lake Izabal --, get picked up in the town of Mariscos, and drive one hour to Morales, where we meet Chanjelo by the central bus

station. Together, we drive another hour to the former Del Monte banana plantation, where 66 families are fighting for the lives, community and land.

Since October 2001, after the men were illegally fired by the Bandegua Company (subsidiary of Del Monte), almost 70 families occupied unused lands. By law, Del Monte had to either use its land, or return the lands to the State.

Under a tin roof shelter, about 100 community members gather. They have cooked their best meal (chicken, rice, potatoes and guiskil) for the visitors. Few visit them here, but enemies. After thanking us for visiting, they speak of their isolation, insecurity, their (evident) poverty, and of the

political and legal proceedings that are going nowhere. They thank us for coming and ask us politely to bring pressure internationally so that the killing might stop, so that the land might be granted to them—to survive.

Since October 2001, 9 community members have been assassinated; their names were read out to all who were gathered under the tin roof.

* * * *

And back to Guatemala City ... for a final debriefing. How to process all of this, so many people living such precarious and dangerous lives ... and this is normal? And a host of northern governments, "development" institutions and companies fully engaged in profitable businesses and dealings in a place like Guatemala



HAITI EMERGENCY FUND



Make your tax-deductible donations payable to Rights Action (indicating Haiti Fund in the memo line) and mail to our office in the US or Canada.

In response to the devastating May 2004 rains, floods and mudslides and the March 2004 military coup (resulting in increased poverty, displacement, repression and weakening of the rule of law), Rights Action has created a “Haiti Emergency Fund” that will be distributed to Haitian groups set out below, amongst others.

- ▶ **MARCH 2004:** The March military coup, ousting the government of President Aristide, has devastated what was already the poorest country in the Americas. We seek financial support for organizations with a long-term commitment to building the institutions of democracy and the rule of law. Many of the groups we will support are suffering direct repression now, targeted by the post-coup government.
- ▶ **MAY 2004:** With respect to the May floods and devastation, we seek financial support for groups that are not-only providing short-term humanitarian relief to affected communities, but that also have a long-term vision of building a community development model in Haiti that does not condemn people to live in desperate and vulnerable conditions of poverty.

HAITIAN ORGANIZATIONS TO RECEIVE EMERGENCY GRANTS:

In conjunction with non-government organizations with years of experience working in Haiti (including the Quixote Center, EPICA and the Haiti Action Committee, amongst others), we have compiled a preliminary list of organizations:

Members of Haiti’s largest human rights organization, the Fondasyon Trant Septam (FTS), are in hiding throughout the country. For more than 10 years, FTS held a weekly vigil in the Plaza of Martyrs, across the street from Haiti’s National Palace. They work for justice and an end to impunity, and members are mainly urban slum dwellers who were victimized during the 1991 coup d’etat. In addition, FTS coordinated a campaign to prevent the Haitian Army from being re-established. Their leader Lovinsky Pierre-Antoine, a psychologist with a long history of work with torture victims, went into exile on March 2.

Under the FTS umbrella: the Women Victims’ Standing Strong (FAVILEK), the Coordination of Strong Women of Cite Soleil, the Federation of Victims of the 1991 Coup d’Etat and the COFEVIH women’s victims group.

The Haitian Commission for the Respect of Human Rights (CHREDHU) an affiliate of the Confederation of Haitian Workers (CTH), as well as members of the CTH itself, including Paul Loulou Chery, who was forced into hiding after meeting with the Quixote Center’s Emergency Haiti Observation Mission, April 2004.

The Federation of Feminists in Petionville, FOPEP, membership includes domestic workers in this suburb of Port-au-Prince, as well as five regional groupings of rural women.

A federation of teachers’ unions in the North and Northeast of Haiti, called FAENNE (Teacher’s Union Federation) covers thirty-four districts.

We will add groups to this list, as the Emergency Fund grows and we receive information updates from our partner groups in Haiti. For more information about how Rights Action maintains and oversees funding and working relations with our partner groups, go to www.rightsaction.org or contact: info@rightsaction.org, 416-654-2074.

HAITI EMERGENCY FUND

Given the horrendous humanitarian and political situation in Haiti, Rights Action is joining efforts by other North American NGOs to raise emergency funds for community-based groups in Haiti. **See details on page 7.**

FUTURE DELEGATIONS

If you would like to be informed of future educational delegations to Guatemala, Chiapas, Honduras and Peru, please get yourself on our email list at **info@rightsaction.org**.

CHIXOY DAM REPARATIONS CAMPAIGN

We are pleased to announce the publication of *Continuing the Struggle for Justice and Accountability in Guatemala: Making reparations a reality in the Chixoy Dam Case*, a special report by COHRE (**www.cohre.org**) and Rights Action. Email **info@rightsaction.org** or call 416-654-2074 to get a copy.

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