

Rights Action

www.rightsaction.org • September 2004

The danger of good examples in Guatemala, Chiapas & Honduras

In July, I traveled to Guatemala, Chiapas and Honduras to visit community development organizations that Rights Action supports with your donations (indicated below**) and lead a ten day seminar for North American law students, lawyers, and educators. We visited rural communities to learn of exploitation and poverty, repression and survival, as well as locally-controlled community development.

At every turn, we were reminded that historical and global perspectives are needed to understand the structural injustices and inequalities against the majority populations in places like Chiapas, Honduras and Guatemala. *Open Veins of Latin America* by Eduardo Galeano, is often the first book we recommend to anyone interested in learning about poverty, racism, repression and community development alternatives in Latin America.

Thank-you for your on-going financial support for this work. Please send me your comments and questions about this work.

– Grahame Russell



GUATEMALA

WE DO NOT ASK FOR WHAT IS OURS...

So reads a banner by the door of the former American Club on 12th Street of Zone 1 in Guatemala City. Across from the US Embassy, the club was owned by the United Fruit Company in the 1940s, and may have been a place for conspiratorial discussions about over-throwing democratic governments. In the 1980s, the building housed the Guatemalan immigration authorities, where citizens applied for documents needed to flee the repression and genocide. Many who entered, never left. It sat abandoned from 1991 to June 2004, when the Bloque Anti-Imperialista—a network of community-based groups like HIJOS** (Sons and Daughters of the Disappeared and Killed)—reclaimed it for the Guatemalan people. Here, they organize educational forums and debates, document the truth about the past, and demand justice for the crimes. They are trying to raise money to paint and repair the building.

TAX DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS:

Make checks payable to "Rights Action" and mail to either our Canadian or US office.

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MAPS

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Racism ended a visit to Guatemala by reporting that racism is well entrenched in Guatemala. He said that the map of racism is identical to the map of poverty, which, in turn, is identical to the map of the victims of genocide and repression... all of this reflecting the power structure here since European imperialism initiated the so-called discovery of the Americas.

CHILDREN OF THE STOPLIGHTS

Along the avenues of wealthy neighborhoods in Zones 9, 10, 13, 14 and 15, children perform tricks for cars stopped at red lights. Some painted like clowns, these children juggle, faint, breathe fire, then scurry from window to window for spare change. They do this all day long, red light after red light. Experts cited in the media, blame the impoverished parents of these children, rarely considering the economic and political system that keep 80% of the population in poverty.

“The future of children is always now, tomorrow will be too late,” says Gabriela Mistral of Romeritos**, that works with street children, trying to provide alternatives to the street, gangs, drugs and violence.

CHIKACH FAIR TRADE STORE

On 12th street in Zone 1, the Chikach store sells honey, jam, soap, shampoo, fragrances, herbs, spices, pottery, etc, that are produced in rural communities across the country. For over ten years, FUNCEDESCRI** (Foundation for Community Development) has spearheaded community development work in Mayan communities across the country. Now, their products are for sale. This is fair trade, which means fair prices to local producers; the use of local products and skills; and community control over production, marketing and reinvestment. Shop here and your hair will shine brighter, your toast taste better, and you will help, with your dollars and consumption, to build a better world.

A MEASURE OF JUSTICE: The Plan de Sanchez Trial

Since 1995, we have supported development projects in the mountain-top Mayan Achi village of Plan de Sanchez** Rabinal, in the department of Baja Verapaz. These projects include the exhumation of mass graves; re-burial of massacred loved ones; construction of a commemorative monument; a loan fund to re-build the community; the pursuit of justice for the July 18, 1982 massacre of 282 community members; and participation in a genocide trial against leaders of Guatemala’s military regime of the early 1980s. While the Guatemalan court system is most well-known for its impunity, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has found the government of Guatemala guilty of the Plan de Sanchez massacre. There are 625 other massacres in the country (according to the United Nations Truth Commission report, 1999) that have yet to receive even a measure of justice. No ranking political or military officer has gone to jail for over 200,000 people—85% Mayan—who were killed or disappeared. Many military or political leaders of the 1970s-90s now occupy positions in the various political parties, with whom the international community—governments, IMF, World Bank, corporations and banks, CIDA, AID, etc—does business. Nevertheless, the Plan de Sanchez trial serves as a measure of justice.

ROLE OF THE ARMY

“The president of Guatemala, ... representative of the local oligarchy, is more concerned about rewarding those people [Army and Civil Defense Patrols] who protected their wealth... than

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with providing reparations to the victims. Ultimately, the racist President must be thinking [the victims] were only Indians. Unfortunately the decision of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights did not provide criteria as to how much money the Guatemalan State had to provide to [the village of Plan de Sanchez for loss of life and damages caused during the July 18, 1982 massacre of 268 Maya-Achi villagers].

... The Guatemalan State should pay the survivors the equivalent of the budget that the Army used to kill. This is the minimum that one can ask for. That their budget was very high does not matter. Ultimately, this country, founded upon racism, owes more to the Mayan people and to the massacred ones than to anyone else and the only success the Army has ever had has been attacking unarmed Indians. So what if this would undermine the Army's budget? When has this institution, called a national army, done anything to benefit the country? ..." *Sam Colop, Prensa Libre, July 7*

THE LOGICAL CIRCLE GAME

In the past, people were assassinated for demanding a minimum wage. Western-backed regimes killed more than 200,000 to quell civilian movements and an armed opposition clamouring for an end to inequality and injustice. Now, the people are being told they live in a time of peace and democracy. So now the poor are again demanding a minimum wage. Not surprisingly, CACIF (Comite de Asociaciones Agricolas y Fiancieras)—which defends the interests of the business elites—is blocking legislation to raise the minimum wage to \$145 per month. The protests will increase and in turn there will be more repression.



CHIAPAS

LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT

On the wall of CAPISE** (Centro de Análisis Político e Investigaciones Sociales y Económicas) hangs a map of Chiapas covered by dozens of dots which represent military bases. The war is far from over in Chiapas. Powerful sectors in Mexico and the global north still fear the Zapatista social-indigenous movement. CAPISE documents and works to remedy military abuses, illegal expropriations of indigenous land, etc.

12,000 PEOPLE DISPLACED

Some 3500 impoverished families cannot return to their rural villages. In the past few years, paramilitary groups, working under or alongside the Army, have attacked Zapatista supporters, killed hundreds, burned home and crops, and stolen the lands that have been fled. Thousands wait to return to their homes, as well as for reparations for lost property and livelihoods. They wait for justice that doesn't come. Instead, they face continued low-intensity conflict. In the late 90s, we channeled thousands of dollars to support the needs of the displaced. Funds are still needed.

WOMEN OF CORN IN RESISTANCE**

From one hut or one village to another, women overcome obstacles of poverty, husbands, the Church, racism, and politics to receive support and training from Mujeres de Maiz en Resistencia. Some are part of the Zapatista movement, others are not. Together they form economically viable cooperatives providing education and empowerment in human rights as

well as women's rights. They established a refuge for women and girls victimized by gender violence in Las Margaritas. They illustrate the potential for a new world order.

THE MEDIA IS NOT THE MESSAGE

For generations, global information and media conglomerates—private and government—have justified global economic, military and political power by exaggeration, distortion and lying. COMPPA** (Comunicadores Populares por la Autonomía) works with the Zapatista movement and other community development movements in the Americas (like COPINH**, Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations in Honduras) to establish their own information networks, produce their own news, videos and histories.

BULLETS FOR A BUCKET OF WATER

On April 10, Ruben, of the Red de Defensores Comunitarios** came to the town of Zinacatan to mediate a conflict with local authorities who had cut off water to local Zapatista families. On April 11, Ruben came back with a video camera and a caravan of vehicles carrying tanks of water. Local paramilitaries opened fire on men, women and children. Ducking and running, Ruben filmed the ambush, where dozens of people were hit by bullets. Is there a chance for justice? The Red is carrying the case forwards in the courts, despite widespread impunity. Individuals trained by COMPPA** are preparing a video, and urgent actions have been sent internationally. The chilling reality is that the shooters walk free in Zinacatan and are supported by local authorities. Luckily, all those injured in the ambush will recover.

ZAPATISTAS: Danger of a Good Example

Oventic is one of five Caracoles the Zapatista movement established to expand indigenous and community-controlled government and development. Oventic illustrates how good development can operate. It has started primary and secondary schools which teach in Mayan languages and Spanish and use participatory pedagogy to teach empowerment and dignity. There is a dental and health clinic—actually a small hospital—that was built and operates locally. They also have an arts and crafts workshop operated by Mayan women, producing, selling and exporting clothes, fabrics and artesanía; a boots and shoes workshop which produces and sells 1000s of top-quality leather footwear per year; a coffee collective, which produces and markets organic fair trade coffee both locally and globally; a video production collective, which documents everything from recent aggressions in Zinacatan to Mayan history and spirituality; an internet collective with a satellite connection that by-passes global corporate information manufacturers and links Oventic to other Caracoles and movements—national and global—working for justice.

This is the threat of a good example, of locally-controlled development and human rights for all. Not perfect, but beautiful.



GUATEMALA

THE MAN CARRYING HIS DEAD DAUGHTER:

A Story About Feudalism, Slavery & Northern Consumers

Interview with Bishop Alvaro Ramazzini, Prensa Libre, July 11

Q: "What is the problem with land in Guatemala?"

A: "It is a problem that dates back to the period of colonialism. ... The large latifundios have only benefited the owners. It is a system of land ownership that favors slavery. I

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have visited fincas [large farms for exportation] in the department of San Marcos and I can tell you that the people live there in a feudal system. ... People on the fincas live lives of slavery. They receive very low salaries because they are not owners of the land. They work from the time they get up, til night falls, without ever seeing the benefits of their work. They are condemned to do the same thing as their parents and grandparents and their children will do the same. ...

"A few years ago, I visited the village of Tajumulco, San Marcos. As I was hiking in, I passed a man carrying a large load on his back. When I asked him what he was carrying, he told me it was his little daughter sick with sarampion, and he still had 2.5 hours to hike until he would get to the health clinic. I told him I wanted to see how his girl was doing, and when we uncovered her, I saw that she was dead He told me she had died a half hour before but that he did not return to his village because he was going to bury her in Tajumulco. He told me that his wife and three other children were also sick. After two days, he got back with some medicine, but he was only able to save one child."

And the global order? All the large latifundios—where millions of poor Guatemalans work to barely survive—produce sugar, coffee, bananas and non-traditional crops that are sold for export to North American consumers.

WANT TO EARN A QUICK \$5000?

In the 1980s, Jose Antonio Solares was a Colonel in the Guatemala Army in charge of the Baja Verapaz military zone where thousands of Mayan Achi people were massacred under his command as a part of the western world's so-called war on communism in the Verapaces. Since then, like most men of power with blood on their hands, Capitan Solares has lived free. In the few trials that have proceeded, it is low ranking soldiers and civil defense patrollers who take the fall.

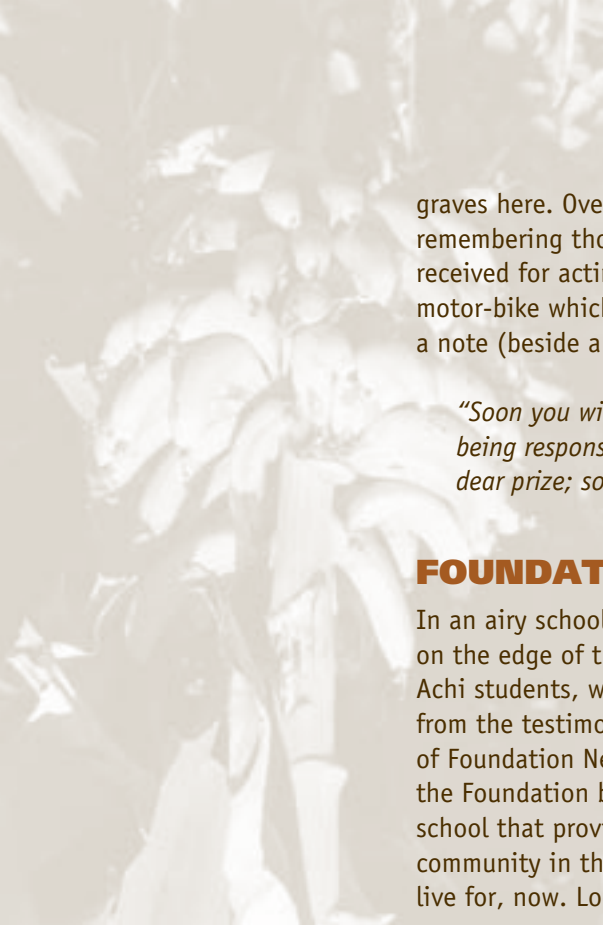
Our seminar group visits the offices of ADIVIMA** (Association for the Integral Development of the Victims of the Violencia, Maya-Achi), a group that Rights Action has funded since 1995 for a range of development projects which benefit of genocide survivors. ADIVIMA has recently offered \$5000 for Solares' capture. Mug shots appear in newspapers and want ads across the country. While Solares has been protected by the army and oligarchy, the net is closing. Go ADIVIMA go... but be careful, for as community development activists get closer to the military and political sectors responsible for massacres and genocide, the chances of further repression increases.

SACRED BOXES, JULY 15

At the offices of the FAFG** (Fundacion de Antropologia Forense de Guatemala), our seminar group shuffles by tiny wooden caskets designated for the remains of the exhumed ones. Boxes are stacked to the ceiling. We read: "FAFG 353-1. Antiguo Destacamento Military, Rabinal, BV, 09/07/04." Recently shipped from a former military outpost, they contain remains of 72 bodies carefully exhumed from an abandoned water over 20 meters deep, making it a very difficult dig. The FAFG will conduct forensic studies to determine the identity and cause of death of these individulas. This information will serve as evidence in criminal trials against the perpatrators and intellectual authors of the massacres ... if ever impunity ends. Then the remains will be returned in small sacred boxes to their communities and loved ones.

GOING AFTER THE WITNESSES

When our seminar group visits the mountaintop community of Plan de Sanchez, I meet again with Salvador. We first met in 1994 at the time of the initial exhumation** of mass



graves here. Over the years, we have met at different occasions like today, all related to remembering those lost and justice for their survivors. Salvador tells us of a death threat he received for acting as witness in legal cases for the massacres. Two nights ago, he heard a motor-bike which is unusual in such a remote community. The next morning, Salvador found a note (beside a defused bomb) by the door to his hut that read:

“Soon you will be dead for being a witness to the Plan de Sanchez massacre and for being responsible for the sentence against the Guatemalan government. This is your dear prize; soon you will be assassinated. Happy anniversary of July 18.”

FOUNDATION NEW HOPE**

In an airy school—constructed recently with some Canadian solidarity carpenter support—on the edge of the town of Rabinal, our seminar group watches a play put on by Mayan-Achi students, whose families are survivors of the genocide. They are acting a chapter from the testimonial book *The Rio Negro Massacres*, by Jesus Tecu Osorio.** Jesus, founder of Foundation New Hope, wandered off to tend to some cows grazing on the property the Foundation bought with international support.** Here they have built a wonderful school that provides a bi-lingual, multi-cultural education. Jesus—who lost his family and community in the massacres of the 1980s—looks at the students and says, “That is what I live for, now. Look at their pride and sense of self-worth.”

DON'T LIKE 'EM? JAIL 'EM OR ... KILL 'EM

In the Morales banana lands, 200 campesinos protest the illegal jailing of Transito Ramirez, legal representative of CUC** (Committee of Campesino Unity). Jailed on [false] charges of murder, environmental destruction, fiscal fraud, and rape, Transito is living the consequences of being a local leader and for fighting for rights of farm workers. Since October 2001, nine men, also activists, from the Lanquin 2 community have been killed by men with guns. The perpetrators were hired by local landowners supplying bananas to the Del Monte fruit company for export to northern consumers. No cases have been brought forward so far...

MINING COMPANIES AND COMMUNITY NON-RIGHTS

From El Estor, on the lazy north shore of lake Izabal, our seminar group drove 2 hours in a 4-wheel drive pick-up over a precipitous mountain range, to the Maya-Q'eqchi' community of Rio Sauce Sexan. We listen to a meeting between leaders of isolated communities (most inaccessible by road) and activists from AEPDI** (Asociacion Estoreense de Poblaciones y Derechos Indigenas). AEPDI activists inform the dismayed communities members that their lands have been given to Canadian and US mining companies in multi-decade concessions. They have, after [non-existent] extensive consultation—assured to international investors like the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, the Canadian government—obtained rights to explore every inch of land. If valuable minerals are discovered, the companies may relocate local communities that have been there for generations and use as much water as needed, leaving the fate of these families uncertain...



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HONDURAS

THE “DEVELOPMENT” LIE

Same day, same newspaper: On one page of the Prensa Libre (July 27), the reader learns that a team of “experts” from the Washington-based IMF (International Monetary Fund) met in Honduras with the economic and political elites, concluding that “Honduras is advancing on the right path” strengthening its economy. On another page, one learns that in 19 regions of Honduras the government has declared food alerts given the “situation of hunger that people in 19 municipalities in 6 States are living through.” Official figures show that 7200 people die of starvation per year, let alone the chronic impoverishment of the over 70% of the population.

Just like that. The government and IMF affirm that the development model (read ‘favorable business climate for national and foreign investors’) is sound, even as death by starvation and chronic poverty characterize the lives of the vast majority of the population.

THE FORMER RIVER BABILONIA

Where once a lovely river flowed (Gualaco, department of Olancho) and glorious water fell, where communities irrigated plants, animals and lives, a business idea came to life. International investors were contacted, palms were greased and laws re-written or side-stepped. Men with guns were hired to protect the investment and killed Carlos Flores, a member of the local community development organization CEPAVEG.** They privatized the river, built a dam, called it development, and pocketed the profits. The astute backpacker will notice that the most recent *Traveler’s Guide* no longer refers to the Babilonia Waterfalls as a wonderful natural attraction, as water no longer flows over the now privatized falls. They are unlikely to notice that poor local communities are now even poorer, and that Carlos Flores is dead for opposing this so-called development.

A LONG WAY TO REPRESS A POOR COMMUNITY

Our seminar group hikes 4 hours up to the Montana Verde community (departments of Intibuca and Lempira) along the same path that heavily armed men marched on January 8, 2003, to carry out a midnight raid of beating and terror, capturing and torturing Marcelino and Leonardo Miranda. Citing a series of trumped up charges, the security forces victimized the community, capturing leaders of the Montana Verde Indigenous Council.** The community owns title to the land, so force and manipulation of the legal system is the favored option of wealthy landowners who want the land.

WHO IS NELSON MANDELA?

In Gracias (department of Lempira), our seminar group gathers in the courtyard of the local prison. Marcelino and Leonardo Miranda have been here since the January 2003 raid of their community. They describe how when gun-totting men made infants, children and elderly lie face down in the mud all night, beat and tortured the men and women, including Marcelino and Leonardo. The Miranda brothers and their community—with the support of COPINH** (Civic Council of Indigenous and Popular Organizations)—are resisting displacement by wealthy landowners with military connections, who want their land for cattle-grazing, water sources and potential mining.

The brothers speak softly, determined not to give up the fight for their land and rights. They hope more will join the international campaign** for their liberty. They have been found guilty of trumped up charges of murder and sentenced to 29 years jail.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

From La Esperanza, Honduras, our seminar group drives back to Guatemala City. We talk about what can be done. Rights Action has a list of ideas of how people can get involved in work for global justice and equality. Everyone needs to understand and believe they can do so much right where they are—in their home community, religious centre, education institution, work-place, etc—to help make this a just world for all people to live in harmony with the environment. It is not a pipe-dream, but a fact and possibility. In the Gracias prison, we spoke with the Mirandas who face the reality of 29 years in jail, and all they really talked about was that their struggle for the rights and dignity of their community will continue.

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