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Searching for the lost and disappeared children of Guatemala

Aaron Bates

It has been six years since the official end of Guatemala's 36 years of state repression and genocide. More than 20 years have passed since the military massacres and calculated acts of state terrorism tore apart Maya Achi communities in the area of Rabinal, department of Baja Verapaz. Today, widows and massacre survivors are beginning the search for children and grandchildren lost or disappeared during the conflict.

ADIVIMA, the Association for Integral Development of the Victims of Violence in the Verapaz Departments, is a grass roots organization located in Rabinal. It works to dignify the memory of those people killed during the years of "violence", to seek justice for the crimes against humanity of the past, and to provide social and economic opportunities for surviving victims.

As part of this work, ADIVIMA is working with the National Commission for the Search for Disappeared Children, to locate and identify children who were kidnapped and disappeared or adopted during the years of repression. In 1999, a United Nations Truth Commission concluded that over 200,000 people (mainly Mayan) were massacred or disappeared, close to 1.5 million were displaced from their homes and communities, and that hundreds of thousands of children were orphaned. The Truth Commission found that the Guatemalan regime (fully backed by the US and other Western countries, the World Bank, and global companies and banks) carried out genocide in Mayan regions of the country, including Rabinal.

On November 14, 2002, a group of 40 widows from the Rabinal area, along with ADIVIMA and representatives from the National Commission for the Search for Disappeared Children, arrived at the well-groomed doorsteps of Zona Militar 21, a military base near the city of Cobán in Guatemala's northern highlands. As a sign of how some things have changed since the signing of the Peace Accords of 1996, the current commanders of Zona Militar 21 agreed to meet with ADIVIMA and survivors from the Rabinal area.

Upon entering the base, one is greeted by a plaque, graced by crossed American and Guatemalan flags, commemorating the deaths of Guatemalan and American Air Force pilots who were killed during joint military exercises.

During the meeting, the Rabinal massacre survivors presented a petition to the base commanders, stating that they witnessed the kidnapping of 44 people, mostly children but also women and elderly, by a military helicopter from the Zona Militar 21, during the "Los Encuentros" massacre of Río Negro villagers that occurred on May 14, 1982. Forty others were killed that day by the soldiers and paramilitaries.

It is a positive sign that some of Guatemala's least powerful citizens now have the social power to confront an institution that at one point did its best to destroy them. However, a

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Children of Guatemala

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sign of how little some things have changed in Guatemala is the way the commanders responded to the petition. Many bad things happened during the war, they stated. This is the unfortunate nature of warfare. The modern military, they continued, is doing its best to work with the people. And on and on.

The families left the base with nothing more than a vague promise that the military would search its files (which it claims are destroyed every three years) for information regarding the “Los Encuentros” massacre. The survivors left with the knowledge that they had met with their former oppressors and told their stories to those who kidnapped their children and tortured their families.

During the years of violence, certain members of the Catholic Church were actively (and courageously) involved with sheltering children orphaned by the massacres and children born to mothers who were raped, rape having been a widespread form of repression used by the Army and paramilitaries. Massacre survivors, along with ADIVIMA and representatives from the National Commission for the Search for Disappeared Children met with Catholic sisters in the northern town of Cantabál, and in the community of Pacux, near Rabinal.

In Pacux (where survivors of the 1982 Río Negro massacres now live), a Catholic Sister — who had worked with orphaned children in the Rabinal area during the conflict — brought testimonies and photos of 32 children adopted by families in Ireland, Norway and Sweden. During this meeting, four children from the surrounding villages of Chichupac and Chuateguá, as well as from Pacux were tentatively identified by family members. Three of these children had been held captive by the military, while the fourth was given to the Catholic Church, as the mother was raped by a member of the military.

Identifying lost children (these “children” are now all adults in their 20’s) is not a first step in reuniting families. Potential reunion of these families is a complex and heart-wrenching process, in the best case scenario. The lives led by these young adults in Europe are as different from their families in rural Guatemala as is possible to imagine. They speak English, Norwegian and Swedish. Their biological families speak the Mayan language of Achi, and perhaps Spanish as a second language. As of yet, only 12 of the 32 children have consented to have their biological families contact them. It is likely that few of the children have much knowledge of the extent of repression and genocide that occurred to their home communities when they were infants.

Given these conditions, some might question whether the search for children disappeared and lost over 20 years ago is worthwhile. What is the value of having painful meetings with disdainful,

often racist military officials regarding a mass kidnapping when all that is offered in response is recycled rhetoric? What is the value of searching for children adopted by European families, knowing that these children will not speak native languages, will likely know little of their culture and may not give consent to be contacted?

Clearly the meetings and the process are crucial for the surviving family members. They are individuals who still live in poverty and face racism and who often walk half a day from their isolated communities to reach these meetings. It is the process of re-building their torn and dispersed families and communities that has become so important for healing.

During the meetings women have stood up and told, usually for the first time, their stories with the knowledge that others were interested in what they had to say. Many wept while describing why they desperately had to turn their children over to the church. More wept while speaking of how their children were kidnapped and lifted away by a military helicopter before their eyes. For perhaps the first time in their lives, these women were able to speak openly about their experiences and suffering.

Healing old wounds can take many forms, and knowing that others are compassionately listening is one of them.

For Carlos Chen Osorio, himself a survivor of the March 13, 1982 Río Negro massacre (where he lost his pregnant wife and two young children) and head of ADIVIMA’s Human Rights division, the process “is important because we are

talking about our families, because these people may be able to find out if their children are alive.”

Individual and community healing is the crucial first step to the community re-building and economic development work that ADIVIMA also carries out. Meetings of this sort are an essential part of the healing process. For all the value that lies in confronting your oppressors, in speaking openly and humanly of your loss, and in identifying and locating lost children, these people remain poor and marginalized; they remain uncompensated for the tremendous losses they suffered during Guatemala’s 36 years of conflict, repression and genocide. However small human rights victories might appear – often invisible, immeasurable steps— these efforts and encounters are hugely important victories in the path towards healing, re-building and justice.

Aaron Bates is a Canadian International Development Agency youth intern working with ADIVIMA in Rabinal, Guatemala. The CIDA internship program in Rabinal is jointly administered by Rights Action, the Tatamagouche Centre, and the Maritimes Breaking the Silence network.

Rights Action funds and works with Guatemalan organizations working to locate children who were lost, during the years of massacres and genocide, and adopted by families in other countries. Your tax-charitable donations to Rights Action support this work. Contact us to learn more about this work.

From Honduras to Baghdad

The Anti-War Protest You Didn't Hear About

Matt Ginsberg-Jaeckle

La Esperanza, Honduras, 2/15/2003 — Three o'clock in the morning is a cold hour in La Esperanza, Honduras. Below the streaming light of a full moon and the starkly illuminated clouds, a busload of members of the indigenous Lenca population of Western Honduras begins to carve a path through the crisp evening air. Over a hundred Lencas from the Civil Counsel of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH) begin the four-hour journey from the mountains to the US embassy in Tegucigalpa. There they will join hundreds of unionists, students, and other indigenous peoples to participate in a worldwide day of action against the war in Iraq.

To an observer, it seems remarkable that people, whose days involve working in the fields, making tortillas by hand, and struggling just to survive, would make the trek to protest a war seemingly so far away from their daily lives. However, the word war – in all its connotations – is all too familiar to the hundreds of Hondurans who participated in the protest.

The US military maintained a presence in Honduras, beginning in the 1980s when it served as a base for US counter-insurgency wars in both Nicaragua and El Salvador. Hundreds of Hondurans were disappeared and thousands were killed at the hands of US-trained counter-insurgency squads, while US troops did untold damage in mountain communities while on patrol.

Many groups at the protest expressed solidarity with the Iraqi and Palestinian people and drew parallels between US imperialist aggression in Latin America to that in the Middle East. They also saw the emergence of a different sort of war. COPINH leader Salvador Zúniga denounced the Bush administration saying, "While Bush drops bombs on Iraq, we must remember that he drops 'economic bombs' on the countries of the Third World every day. The Free Trade agreements which the US, along with and through the WTO, World Bank and IMF, impose on us, such as the Free Trade Area of the Americas and Plan Puebla Panamá, can be seen as nothing less than economic warfare."

Economic warfare was a recurring theme of the protest. Speakers pointed out that, while almost a million Iraqis have died from UN economic sanctions, many in Latin American have also suffered and died as a result of economic measures. They argued that strict economic policies imposed by IMF and World Bank Structural Adjustment Programs, as well as Free Trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) have made devastating impacts.

One speaker argued that if a child was denied access to privatized hospitals due to his or her inability to pay World Bank-imposed user fees, this child could be seen as a victim of warfare. As Mother Theresa once said, "Poverty is the worst form of violence." As

the Honduran currency is devalued year after year under the pretext of attracting investment, it decreases the purchasing power of meager wages earned by Honduran workers and limits or bars access to even the most basic necessities.

As international economic actors demand that labor and environmental restrictions be cut to attract investors, wages continue to fall dramatically while unions are dismantled. Many workers are forced to survive on less than \$3 per day, far from the money needed to provide for a family's basic needs.

Meanwhile, proposed projects like the El Tigre Dam in Western Honduras – an Inter-American Development Bank project – threatened to wipe out thousands of indigenous and campesino households. Under guidelines of the Plan Puebla Panamá, energy from such projects will be bought and sold on a new regional energy market that is unlikely to benefit these displaced rural populations. The El Tigre Dam would be strategically located next to *maquila* zones across the border in El Salvador. Protesters argued that this would be another example of economic warfare.

Protesters paralled the imperialist aggression in Iraq with the neo-colonial economic structures throughout the Third World. In both cases, the US claims the moral authority to make economic and political decisions for citizens of foreign nations.

As the world community come to understand the incentives of large oil companies to assure control of petroleum-rich Iraq, they also understand the incentive of US corporations to seek greater control of the labor force and abundant natural resource in Latin America through neoliberal economic structures. To demonstrate their opposition to such policies and practices, Honduran protestors chanted "No queremos, no nos da la gana, ser una colonia, Norteamericana" (*We do not want to be a North American colony*), and burned US flags and continued with chants of "Quémala, quémala, por invasor" (*Burn it, burn it, [as punishment] for invasion*).

Hondurans sent a strong message that anti-war movements must address all forms of warfare and that stopping the war in Iraq is an immediate goal. Applause echoed in the streets to support the "human shields" traveling to Iraq from all over the world. Fists shot up as a union leader read a list of demonstrations around the world against impending war.

The point was also made that the mission of an effective resistance movement must be to build a new society. There can be no room for colonialist, economic or military manipulation – through oil wars in the Mideast or economic agreements in Latin

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Book Release:

The Río Negro Massacres

by Jesús Tecú Osorio

Rights Action is proud to announce the sale of *The Río Negro Massacres* from our Washington DC & Toronto offices. *The Río Negro Massacres* is a eyewitness account of the Río Negro massacres in Guatemala by survivor Jesús Tecú Osorio. It includes reproductions of the author's original drawings

Jesús Tecú Osorio is a Mayan-Achi who lives in Rabinal, Baja Verapaz, Guatemala with his wife and children. He survived the March 13, 1982, massacre of 177 women and children in the village of Río Negro. Jesús lost his parents and all but one sibling in the massacres. Since 1993, Jesús has worked to seek justice for the genocide and other abuses of the past, and to heal and rebuild his torn region of Guatemala.

TO ORDER COPIES OF THE BOOK:

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From Honduras to Baghdad

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America and the Third World. Using a phrase adopted by worldwide anti-corporate globalization protests, the world must "globalize solidarity" because "another world is possible."

This is the dream that drew campesinos, indigenous peoples, trade unionists and students from around Honduras to protest at the US embassy. They denounced the war and called for a world without the economic exploitation and military aggression. The spirits of the COPINH members remained high despite fatigue and hunger from a long day, and despite being followed by a car with tinted windows from the embassy back to their bus. Upon arrival back in La Esperanza, the full moon had returned to welcome them home and the surrounding clouds were lit with sunset's colors. Joking and laughing with one another while keeping an eye on the beauty of their mountainous region, the protesters embodied the slogan of the day... **OTRO MUNDO ES POSIBLE!**

Matt Ginsberg-Jaeckle works with Rising Roots International risingrootsinternational@yahoo.com. In collaboration with Rights Action, Matt is working on a computer training program with COPINH.

Delegation to Honduras

(July 15-24, 2003)

International gathering of resistance movements

While the government and media portray economic globalization as unstoppable and say that side-effects are merely inconveniences on the path to development, citizen movements across Latin America and North America think otherwise.

Rights Action invites you to join a delegation that will join indigenous rights advocates, rural environmentalists, religious organizations, student groups, landless peasants, and North American activists for a three-part forum in Honduras in July 2003.

2nd Forum Against Dams - July 17th, La Esperanza, Intibucá:

The World Bank admits that between 40 to 80 million people are displaced due to hydroelectric dams typically managed by private corporations and financed by institutions like the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank. The displaced have often faced repression and violence, while survivors are forced to abandon ancestral lands. Irreversible damage has also been done to biological habitats. The forum is hosted by COPINH (Civil Counsel of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras) and will feature communities effected by dams all over the world. Strategies for resistance and alternatives to hydroelectric dams will be discussed.

3rd Forum for Cultural and Biological Diversity - July 18-

19, La Esperanza, Intibucá: This forum hosted by COPINH will address threats posed by profit-centered neoliberal model of development to diverse ecosystems and cultures. Topics covered will include bio-piracy, genetically modified foods, and indigenous rights. On July 19, there will be a carnival where participants will display regional diversity and exchange information gathered on the previous day.

4th Forum Against Plan Puebla-Panamá - July 21-23,

Tegucigalpa: On July 20, participants will travel to Tegucigalpa for a protest in honor of Lempira, the famed Honduran indigenous anti-colonial fighter. The following day, participants will join activists from across the world in a forum against Plan Puebla-Panamá (PPP), a neoliberal regional development plan that has sparked global concern and an international resistance movement of the Convergence of Popular Movements of the Americas (COMPA). COMPA is the principal sponsor of the event, with assistance from grassroots organizations throughout the hemisphere.

COST: US\$600 (CDN\$850), including room, board and travel in Honduras. *Delegates are responsible for their own airfare.*

WHEN: Arrive in Tegucigalpa July 15 and return to US July 24.

CONTACT: To form your own group or to come individually on this delegation contact info@rightsaction.org or 416-654-2074.