

# Rights Action

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## MUCH MORE THAN 'JUST A COMMA'

On the CNN news program "Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer" (September 24, 2006), Blitzer asked President Bush to comment on the difficult situation in Iraq; Bush dismissed the situation as "just a comma." Here is part of the transcript ([www.thecarpetbaggerreport.com/archives/8551.html](http://www.thecarpetbaggerreport.com/archives/8551.html)):

BLITZER: "Let's talk a little bit about Iraq. Because this is a huge, huge issue for the American public, a lot of concern that perhaps they are on the verge of a civil war, if not already a civil war ... . We see these horrible bodies showing up, tortured, mutilation. ... "

BUSH: "Yes, you see it on TV, and that's the power of an enemy that is willing to kill innocent people. But there's also an unbelievable will and resiliency by the Iraqi people ... . I like to tell people when the final history is written on Iraq, it will look like just a comma because there is — my point is there's a strong will for democracy."

The Carpet Bagger report (cited above) comments: "[This] was a stunning comment. ... It's a crisis that has, by any reasonable measure, made the threat of terrorism against Americans considerably worse. It's a misadventure that has cost taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars, to fight a war sold under false pretenses, and mismanaged with almost child-like incompetence.

"Now, I think I know what the President means. As he sees it, history takes a long view, so three and a half years of mistakes, violence, poor judgment, and corruption are minor details that will be easily overlooked by a long-term triumph. Or so Bush says. Of course, by this logic, everything is "just a comma." Every life, every conflict,

and every generation can be dismissed and made to appear trivial by backing up enough degrees."

\* \* \*

Similar comments might have been made by previous political leaders about US interventions in Latin American conflicts of the 1970s/ 1980s; similar comments might have been made about twice over-throwing the elected governments of President Aristide in 1991, 2004. Systemic repression, torture, disappearances, genocide, exploitation and racism add up to ... 'just a comma.'

In many ways, the community development, environment and human rights work that Rights Action is supporting in Guatemala, Honduras, Haiti and El Salvador are efforts to repair the harms and destruction inflicted on the region by past support for and involvement with the many military / oligarchy dominated regimes.

As it is important to be involved now in efforts to put an end to the harms and destruction being caused by brutal and wrong North American interventions in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, it is important to continue to support efforts in places like Guatemala, Honduras, Haiti and El Salvador to build healthy and just societies that fully respect the rule of law and democracy and that are completely free from the economic and military interventions of the powerful and rich countries of the planet.

It is a tall and long-term order ... and we thank-you for your trust in and support for our work. We would be please to respond to your questions and comments.

— Annie Bird & Grahame Russell

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## **GUATEMALA STRUGGLE AGAINST IMPUNITY**

*Today, as in the 1970s and 80s, Guatemala is 'governed' by abuse of power and impunity; the institutions of a democratic government and the administration of justice do not fundamentally work. A Spanish court has recently issued arrest warrants for Guatemalan war criminals. It is worth noting that the New York Times article (excerpted below) makes no mention of how the genocidal regime was supported militarily, economically and politically by the "international community", lead by the United States, and that in the 1990s and 2000s, the "international community" – lead by the U.S. and Canada – has maintained strong political and economic relations with General Efraim Rios Montt, leader of the FRG party. These economic interests including opening Guatemala to mineral resource exploitation by North American mining companies and the signing of a "free" trade agreement.*

### **Spanish Judge Orders Guatemalan Ex-rulers Arrested**

GUATEMALA CITY (New York Times, July 7, 2006) - A Spanish judge on Friday ordered the arrest of two former Guatemalan military rulers for genocide, torture, illegal arrest and terrorism during the Central American country's civil war. High Court Judge Santiago Pedraz called for former Guatemalan leaders Efraim Rios Montt and Oscar Humberto Mejia Victores to be arrested along with six others in connection with atrocities committed in the 1980s.

Gen. Efraim Rios Montt ruled during the bloodiest years of Guatemala's 36-year-long civil war, when the army launched a scorched-earth counter-insurgency campaign against suspected guerrilla sympathizers, brutally killing thousands and wiping entire villages off the map. In 1999, a U.N.-backed truth commission documented more than 600 massacres – largely committed by the army and its paramilitary fighters – during a war that left over 200,000 mostly Mayan Indians dead or missing.

The ruling requires local Guatemalan officials to issue local arrest warrants for the eight men. Rios Montt, however, is still an important political figure in Guatemala and has been able to avoid charges brought against him in the past. Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu, whose father was one of 37 killed during an assault on the Spanish embassy in 1980, warned it would be tough to make Guatemalan authorities carry out the ruling. "It is going to be a very tortuous road, and it's a test of the Guatemalan justice system," Menchu, who brought charges of genocide against the leaders in Spain in 1999, told Reuters. "We will see if we have advanced."

Judge Pedraz traveled to Guatemala last month to investigate war crimes, including the embassy deaths. But Guatemalan authorities blocked the proceedings by honoring appeals brought by Rios Montt and other ex-leaders and the judge was unable to gather any testimony. Pedraz left the country on July 1 and issued his arrest order after his return to Madrid. Pedraz's ruling is in response to a wartime abuses case Menchu filed in Spain in 1999. ...

**With your support, RA continues to support community-based and non-government organizations in Guatemala, seeking justice for the repression and genocide of the 1970s, 80s, 90s.**



# **GUATEMALA**

## **MORE DAM DEVELOPMENT**

### **The XALALA Project**

*For years, Rights Action has supported efforts to get reparations for the massacres and forced evictions associated with the Chixoy hydro-electric dam project (1975-1985) funded by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. Even as the WB and IDB refuse to remedy the crimes and abuses associated with that “development” project, the Guatemalan government proceeds with more large-scale dam-hydroelectric “development” (read: “big business”) projects, some of them on the very same Chixoy river.*

*We reproduce parts of an article concerning the planned “Xalala dam project” that will destroy the environment and well-being of dozens of villages, including COPAL AA and other Indigenous communities where RA has long been supporting community development and education projects.*

### **On The Banks Of The Chixoy: As Guatemala plans a massive new dam, a village of survivors risks losing everything – again**

**By Michal Lumsden, *Mother Jones Magazine*, November/December 2005 Issue**

A crooked candle casts splotches of light across the cement floor of Diego Perez Andres' two-room house. ... He had spent nearly half his life in a refugee camp in Mexico, one of the million Guatemalans who had fled the vicious military campaign. ... Today, the Perez family is among 100 or so families of former refugees who have made their home in Copal AA (pronounced KO-pa-LA), a tiny town along the banks of central Guatemala's Chixoy River. But after a decade of calm, the people here are again at risk of losing everything. The danger this time is not men with guns, but ... in a dam that threatens to uproot them. ...

In February, one of the few literate men in Copal AA happened to pick up the newspaper *Prensa Libre*, where an article named specific towns likely to be affected by a series of government-approved hydroelectric dams. That's how the residents of the town surrounded by water learned that a dam was to be built on their lifeline. ... Known as the Xalalá Project, the dam is one of eight private hydroelectric projects being promoted by the government. Standing between 860 and 950 feet tall, the dam would generate around 15 percent of the country's electricity. ...

It wasn't the first time the Guatemalan government had moved ahead with a massive hydroelectric project without notifying the people ... . In 1975, a dam funded by the World Bank [and Inter-American Development Bank] started to go up on the Chixoy, upriver from the Xalalá site. Nearby communities didn't learn that they would have to move until two years after construction had begun. Following several years of negotiations and false promises, the government tried a new tactic to clear the area. ... Between February and September 1982, the army carried out a series of massacres in the Chixoy basin, killing more than 400 people. ...

[New] privatization laws, CAFTA (Central America Free Trade Agreement), and foreign-funded projects like Xalalá are all part of an official campaign to attract foreign investment ... . According to Tania Palencia Prado, a columnist for the newspaper *Siglo Veintiuno*,

*continued on page 8*

## HONDURAS

### COLLECTIVE ACTIVISM AND POWER

## Political Prisoners Marcelino and Leonardo Miranda Are Freed

By Sandra Cuffe, *Rights Action, Honduras*



It is time to celebrate some good news for a change! Since January 2003, Rights Action, with your support, has been supporting and involved with efforts in Honduras to free from illegal and abusive detention, the Miranda Brothers, campesino-Lenca political prisoners and members of COPINH (an important RA partner group). On request, we can provide information concerning the very abusive detention and jailing of the Miranda brothers that included torture.

After years of sustained campaigning and pressure in Honduras and internationally, the Honduran Supreme Court of Justice acquitted Montaña Verde community leaders Marcelino and Leonardo Miranda of murder, a fabricated charge for which they had been sentenced to 25 years in jail.

We join COPINH (Civic Council of Grassroots and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras) in celebrating the news and recognizing the many direct actions, letters, telephone calls, faxes, emails and messages from many people that have all contributed to this victory. COPINH declared:

*"This acquittal would not have been possible were it not for all the local, national and international solidarity and pressure. Thus, in the most fraternal way, we thank all the individuals, organizations, churches and other networks and groups that have supported the campaign for the Miranda brothers' freedom."*

Meanwhile, this victory of Marcelino and Leonardo, their families, the communities of Montaña Verde, COPINH, and each and every one of us, is the result of our collective activism and power, made up of every individual letter and action and dedicated individual and institutional donors.

**RA will continue to support COPINH and Montaña Verde in their struggles for justice, land, the environment and locally-controlled community development. We will to support and report on the on-going struggle for the release of other Montaña Verde community leaders (Margarito Vargas – currently in jail, Tiburcio Bautista – falsely accused of several crimes, including the same murder).**



## HONDURAS

### MURDER OF ANOTHER GARIFUNA YOUTH

*This information was prepared by Rights Action's Sandra Cuffe who lives in Honduras. Sandra got this information from our long-term partner group OFRANEH (Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña) that works for and defends the community development, environment and human rights of the African-Indigenous descendant Garifuna communities along the north shore of Honduras.*

During the evening of Sunday August 6th, 19-year old MIRNA ISABEL SANTOS THOMAS was forced from her home in the Garifuna community of San Juan Tela by a group of heavily armed masked men. Her body was found the next morning alongside a road a few kilometers from San Juan, on the other side of the town of Tela, department of Atlántida, on the Caribbean coast of Honduras.

This past February, the cadavers of two San Juan youth were found in the area of the community of La Ensenada, after their detention by soldiers and navy agents. This past June, San Juan community president Jessica García was threatened and forced at gunpoint to sign a document ceding community lands to PROMOTUR, a real estate and tourism company owned by powerful politician, landowner, banker and businessman Jaime Rosenthal Oliva. This occurred after months of repression and human rights violations, including frequent threats, armed incursions by company representatives and the destruction by arson of several San Juan community members' homes, including that of the well-known Lands Defense Committee activist Wilfredo Guerrero.

Upon request, RA can provide articles and urgent actions documenting the links between the ongoing repression in Garifuna communities and the powerful interests of the tourism industry. Aside from PROMOTUR's plans to build a tourism complex on the ancestral Garifuna lands of San Juan Tela, there are numerous resort tourism plans for the Tela Bay, including the Los Micos Beach & Golf Resort. The tourism industry's interests in the region are fueled by the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank and other international organisms supporting the infrastructure and top-down tourism "development" initiatives.

Simultaneous internationally financed programs, such as the World Bank's Honduran Lands Administration Program (PATH), threaten to fragment ancestral, communal Garifuna land titles, in violation of international agreements.

International "development" funds are also destined to the management of protected coastal areas that now form part of the Mesoamerican Biological Corredor, an element of the Plan Puebla Panama. Often managed by the same elite that invests in tourism initiatives, many of these so-called protected areas were created in Garifuna and indigenous territory and now control the local communities' access to their own ancestral lands and resources.

**With your support, RA will continue to support the community development and environment work of OFRANEH, as well as investigate and report on the on-going repression being used by powerful economic sectors.**

## HAITI

# RAPE VICTIMS RISK THEIR LIVES TO DEMAND THEIR RIGHTS

*Rights Action reproduces an edited version of a KOFVIF statement. Since early 2004, RA has supported and worked with KOFVIF.*

### **KOFVIF - Commission Oof Women Victims for Victims** Port-au-Prince, Haiti, September 1, 2006

KOFVIF is a group of Haitian survivors of rape from the 1991-94 military coup d'état. We fought unsuccessfully for justice and reparations for years. When, in 2004 [ed: after the second coup against the elected government of President Aristide], we saw that the same women were being raped again, we shifted our work in order to aid these new victims.

KOFVIF works with women victims from poor neighborhoods like LaSaline, Bel Air, Cité Soleil, Grande Ravine, Ti Bwa, Martissant, and Village de Dieu. We, women victims, say no to all forms of violence and discrimination to which we have been subjected during the last 200 years.

We are victims of rape. Armed groups have forced their way into our homes, stole everything we owned, raped us and our daughters, burned our houses, and threatened us. Many of us were forced to leave our homes and have been sleeping on the mountainside. We have lost our commercial goods, and we do not have the means to send our children to school. When we open our mouths to speak, we risk being threatened or killed.

Haiti has signed more human rights conventions than almost any other state. Yet Haiti remains one of the countries where human rights, particularly women's rights, are most violated. We know that rights do not mean anything when they remain only on paper. ...

Ending violence and discrimination against women is everyone's responsibility. We ask civil society to wake up and condemn this relentless violence. Where are the political parties? What do you have to say about the women of Martissant, Grande Ravine, Corridor La Fwa, Ti Bwa who have been abandoned with no support? Stop using our suffering as propaganda; when you do this, you re-victimize us. ...

We are victims of rape because we are deprived of our social and economic rights. We live in the worst houses. We have no economic means, so we are forced to go out to make a living even that means endangering ourselves. As a result, we are more vulnerable to violence.

We in KOFVIF received care when we were raped. But don't all women have the right to health care for themselves and their children when they are sick? Shouldn't all women have access to care when they deliver their children? Why can't all women live in better conditions so that they aren't exposed to so many diseases?

We say that protecting women's rights is not only about providing safety from those responsible for these abuses, and that justice is not only about putting them in prison. It is about respecting all of our rights and the rights of everyone because we know that poverty is a reason why many women become victims.

We have a right to education. We ask the state to stop the privatization of schools and to build national schools so that women



**RECOMMENDED VIEWING:** *ARISTIDE and the Endless Revolution*, award winning documentary available for \$20. See [www.aristidethefilm.com](http://www.aristidethefilm.com) or email [info@barakaproductions.com](mailto:info@barakaproductions.com)

have access to education. We ask the state to put an effective education program in place so that women can obtain sufficient jobs.

We have the right to work. We ask the state to create jobs for women without discrimination, jobs that will increase women's economic power so that they can achieve economic autonomy. We ask that the state valorize women's work. Women working in the informal sector, especially widows whose husbands were killed during the political conflict and left them with many children, need to have social support. ...

When we think about poverty and lack of respect for human rights, we see that the economic crisis has roots in the foreign policies of powerful countries towards smaller countries like our own. Powerful countries need to see that rights that we are demanding will never be respected if their policies in poor countries do not change. ...

When we heard this week about the judgment against Toto Constant, we felt that a great step forward had been made. We had been waiting for this for a long time. KOFIVIV celebrates the decision taken by an American court against Toto Constant. We congratulate everyone who was fighting to judge this leader of FRAPH. But the fight has just begun and with hope, women will succeed in getting justice and reparations. We will continue the struggle until all criminals have been condemned. This decision gives us a great deal of courage. ...

The fight has just begun. Women's rights must be respected.

**With your support, RA will continue to support and work with KOFIVIV.**

## WHAT TO DO:

- The #1 line of work in favour of the environment, development and human rights is to fund and support local organizations that are at the forefront of work and struggles in their own countries.
- Get involved in education and activism work in your home community concerning the negative impacts of North American economic, political and military policies on the development, environment and human rights needs of local populations in places like Guatemala, Haiti, El Salvador and Honduras. North American citizens must work to bring about changes to unjust Canadian and US economic, military and "development" policies;
- Consider coming to these counties on educational-activist delegations;
- Get on our email and snail-mail lists;
- Invite us for educational presentations in your classes and communities.

CONTACT: Grahame Russell (co-director) with your questions, comments and suggestions. [info@rightsaction.org](mailto:info@rightsaction.org); 860-352-2152 (in Connecticut).

## On The Banks Of The Chixoy

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... they're following a route that's failed before. "It's an old idea that they are now modernizing," she explained. "They think progress is achieved by opening poor nations to products from the north. We've lived this way for more than 500 years." ...

José Manuel Chacón is a political cartoonist and a leader of Colectivo MadreSelva, the Mother Jungle Collective, an environmental group that has unearthed what little is known about Xalalá. ... Chacón described how the proposed dam would flood more than 25 square miles — including at least nine villages — and dry up the river for another 15 towns or so downstream, including Copal AA. Because so little information about the dam has been released ... no one knows exactly where its electricity will go. "What's certain is that it will be sold," Chacón said. What's also likely, he added, is that the power "won't go for the people who need it."

Two months after learning about the dam, around 30 leaders from nearby villages gathered at Copal AA's town hall to discuss what to do next. ... An elder leaned into the circle and clicked away in Q'eqchi'.

"During the war, indigenous communities were most affected by the conflict and now, with these dams, it's the indigenous areas that are going to be most affected again," he said. "They no longer come to kill us with bullets. It's no longer with war that they want to kill indigenous people. Now it's with grand economic plans that they want to finish us off."

**With your on-going support, RA will continue to fund community development and environment projects in the Chixoy river region and support education and organizing work related to the dams, as well as human rights investigations into the potential impact of more hydro-electric projects.**

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