

CAMINOS Newsletter - April 2003

Denver area resident and DJPC member Rick Clifford has been in Guatemala since January, living in an indigenous rural community to accompany witnesses in a landmark lawsuit charging ex-military leaders with genocide during the country's 36-year civil war. Below, Rick describes community life and details the deteriorating human rights situation.

Dear friends and family,

One of my favorite college professors says that the key to good teaching is connecting the *known* to the *unknown*. As a human rights accompanier here in Guatemala, I have been trying to understand my current situation through my previous work, life, and travel experiences. Growing up in a small town in Central Wisconsin, working in college as a backpacking guide in New Mexico, and traveling three different times to the Philippines during the 1990's have proved especially useful as I make the transition from US high school English teacher to human rights worker in Guatemala.

The small town of Ilo, where I spend 80% of my time, has nearly 3000 inhabitants and in some ways resembles the adjoining towns of Colby and Abbotsford where I grew up, went to school, and worked part-time during my childhood. Like my original "hometowns," there are political divisions in Ilo that date back decades and have produced some hard feelings and non-cooperation on projects that could have benefited both sides. The major difference is that the divisions here stem from racism, land grabs, and civil war atrocities.



School children in Ilo

In Ilo those on the north side of town are called Ladinos, people of mixed Spanish and indigenous ancestry. On the south side you find Mayan Ixils, indigenous people who settled and began farming in the Cuchumatane mountains of the Ixil area long before the Ladinos ever arrived. Because of cultural, political and language differences, not much socializing goes on between these two groups. Ixil women often cannot speak Spanish, while Ladino women generally prefer to speak Spanish. Most Ixil men speak some Spanish but prefer to use their first language which is Ixil. Many Ladino men learned Spanish in school and prefer to speak Spanish. So like Colby and Abbotsford, Ladinos and Ixils live side by side but tend to socialize within their own groups. One other similarity is that Colby, Abbotsford, and Ilo's economies are heavily dependent on agriculture, but here in Ilo they produce coffee and cardamom rather than milk.

The major difference between this Guatemalan town and

Wisconsin towns is money. Iloilo has no streetlights, no middle school or high school, no park, no postal service, no fire department, no police station, no garbage pick-up, no dump, no sewage plant, and no water treatment plant. The only electricity in town comes from a gas generator that powers the TV and VCR of the town's kung fu 'cinema' and the 360 solar panels recently installed on the roofs of 360 homes by a group of engineers working for an appreciative politician who won his congressional thanks to the Iloilo vote. On a sunny day the panels provide enough power to run a few ultraviolet lights that illuminate the dirt floor of the family sleeping room or the kitchen area where the mother does all the cooking over an open fire. The 140 families without solar power rely on flashlights, candlelight, firelight, or moonlight to see after dark.

Early on I asked myself, "How can people live under these conditions?" (Basically, some do not. Just last week two babies in Iloilo died from high fevers and chronic diarrhea.) The bigger question is why can't Iloilo and 1000's of towns just like it provide these services to the people?" In a nutshell, I believe it is government corruption that impedes infrastructure development, but more importantly, it is the meager compensation that these farmers receive for the cash crops they grow and harvest.

For example, in Iloilo the main cash crop is organic coffee. For each one-pound bag of coffee that is sold in Europe for \$10, the farmer in Iloilo receives 50 cents. Only 5% of that \$10 goes to the person who cleans the field, plants the coffee, picks the berries, removes the pulp, and dries the coffee beans in the sun before selling them to local buyers! The rest goes to shipping companies, the warehouses, the truck drivers, the government officials, and the retailers. I am no business expert, but something about this whole system seems extremely unfair to both the producer and, to a lesser extent, the consumer who absorbs the 1900% mark up in price. I cannot imagine how Wisconsin dairy farmers could make a living if they only received 19 cents for every gallon of milk that sells for \$3.80 at the local supermarket. My research shows that dairy farmers receive nearly 50% of the proceeds that come from the sale of a gallon of milk. If family farmers in Guatemala received a fair price for their products, perhaps Iloilo would have the revenues necessary to build a high school, a post office, a water and sewage treatment plants and other essential systems for the people in this town.

Fair Trade vs. Free Trade

A man in Denver shares my belief that the producers of our consumer goods deserve a bigger piece of the pie without further gouging the consumer. Kerry Appel has been buying a lot of shade grown, organic coffee from indigenous farmers in Chiapas, Mexico since 1997. He sells the coffee to people in Denver and around the world through his web site www.thehumanbean.com and pays the coffee growers twice the free trade “market” value. This is a concept known as “fair trade.”

Fortunately, fair trade is no longer just a fringe idea. Many people are seeking out fair trade websites like www.globalexchange.org when they want to buy presents for friends and family. I realize people in the US can easily buy something cheap at Wal-Mart, Kohl’s or other chains, but how can they do that in good conscience when they know it perpetuates sweatshops, poverty, and wealth inequality around the world? I laugh when I hear business executives say that their corporations are providing jobs to people who would otherwise be starving. That’s like saying Southern slave owners in the 18th and 19th centuries did blacks a favor by providing them jobs, a place to sleep, and food to eat. Like my father used to say, “A fool knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.”

Backpacking Job Pays Off

As a backpacking guide at Philmont Scout Ranch, I spent four summers teaching Scouts and Explorers about low impact camping, water purification, washing and sanitizing eating utensils, and properly disposing of trash and human waste. Here in Ilom I have applied many of these concepts to my own daily regimen and explained some of them to a few community members interested in the rationale behind these practices. Perhaps the most important practice for my own health has been the filtering and purifying of my own drinking water.

At Philmont I taught young people three methods of purifying water: boiling it for 10 minutes, filtering it through a high quality water filter, or chemically treating the water with iodine or chlorine.

Here I have used my Katadyne filter to get rid of the amoebas, parasites, and bacteria in the water. Then I add two drops of chlorine per liter to kill viruses and anything else that might have made it through the filter. The good news is that I have not had any major intestinal problems since I arrived in community. The bad news is there is no way to completely avoid getting “traveler’s flu” in a place where hygiene is a luxury and to some extent, the causes of waterborne intestinal illnesses are a mystery.

Perhaps another reason for our overall good health is the new accompanier policy of carrying our own eating utensils to the homes of the witnesses and support families where we eat. After each meal with a family, we return to our living quarters in the former health clinic and wash our own eating utensils using soap and chlorinated water and then drying them with towels we know to be clean. Some previous accompaniers regularly became ill with intestinal amoebas and parasites due to the dishwashing methods used by the Ixil women who washed plates with untreated water and served the food on wet plates. Most adults in Iloilom say that they rarely get sick from the water they drink; however, they admit that young children often suffer from diarrhea and fever. Obviously, the adults have developed an immunity to most things living in the water, but their small children suffer periodically from diarrhea until their bodies' immune systems learn to fight them off.

The Director of Teachers in Iloilom recently invited my fellow accompanier and I to give a demonstration to students about various low cost methods of purifying untreated tap water. We first used a sulfur chemical test provided by COMENSA, a local NGO that assists communities with potable water projects, to show students how they can check for the existence of bacteria in their water. We showed them that water taken directly from the tap, boiled water, water treated with chlorine, and water in clear plastic bottles placed in the sun for 24 hours turned golden when the chemicals were added; however, after 12 hours the tap water turned black because of the presence of living bacteria while the others remained golden, meaning they were bacteria-free. Students came away from our presentation with a better understanding of why they and their siblings often have diarrhea and what they could do to lessen their chances of getting sick.

Until January of 2003 people from Iloilom and previous human rights accompaniers had to hike three hours along mule trails to get from the El Cruce bus turnaround to the community. The bus drops people off at 8:30 a.m. and the first part of the hike takes you through cool, unspoiled jungle and crystal clear waterfalls, but the last half of the hike is on hot, steep jeep trails that pass through the stinky town of Sotzil and then past fields of cardamom and corn. Since the end of January the road to Iloilom has been improved to the point where pickups can travel over it safely. Although I have done the hike twice, I must admit that we have ridden in the back of the pick-up six times and found it to be well worth the \$3.25 they charge passengers.

Is This the Philippines?

During the 1990's I lived and worked in Tokyo for three years and spent Christmases with my uncle's children and grandchildren in Manila and in towns outside Manila. When I arrived in Guatemala I was struck by the number of similarities between Guatemalan and Filipino society. These two countries produce textiles at sweatshop prices for the developing world, and both places grow a lot of food for internal consumption and for export. More importantly, both places are full of friendly, creative people who work hard and believe in God. Yet both countries have a high percentage of people living in poverty; they suffer from high levels of government corruption; and they have both lost many people to the United States through war, brain drain, and immigration.

As is the case in many Filipino rural villages, many of the family dwellings in Ilom look like makeshift log houses; some are wood plank, two-room houses; and a few families live in cinder block houses with cement floors. There are many churches in town - most in Ilom are evangelical churches while the Philippines is full of Catholic churches. In small towns there are several shops that sell snacks and basic foods like eggs, sugar, cooking oil, batteries, and candles. You have to throw your toilet paper in a trashcan rather than flush it due to the small size of the pipes. And you really have to watch your stuff when you travel because there are plenty of pickpockets who prefer petty thievery to working in sweatshops, or farming under the blazing hot sun. Perhaps the most glaring similarity is the lack of services and infrastructure due to the overall levels of poverty. In Manila I saw a 50-foot mountain of garbage in a small park that will never get picked up because it was created while garbage workers were on strike. In a small town outside Manila I saw malarial mosquitoes swarming around children who were using an electric fan to keep them away until the power went out. In Guatemala elementary teachers contracted by the Ministry of Education just completed a 50-day strike and risked losing their pay to demand that the government increase spending to help schools that lack desks and basic materials like textbooks. In Ilom a woman with epilepsy recently suffered third degree burns to her hands and arms when a convulsion sent her flying into the cooking fire. She was unable to receive treatment because her husband does not have the money to send her to the hospital. The Cuban doctors working in Ilom do what they can, but they believe she will probably die from the injuries. Her four-year old son and two-year old daughter will likely grow up without a mother. In the Philippines and throughout Latin America these stories and thousand like it play

themselves out every day in the squatter shacks, garbage dumps, and isolated rural villages that lack the basics. Meanwhile, the governments of Latin America are too busy stealing from the public coffers to fix the problems, and governments in the developed world are too busy taking advantage of the cheap labor found in countries where poverty is not the exception but the rule.

2nd Chance to Join International Community

So how am I doing? I am fine. Unfortunately, not all the people in Iloam are fine. Two babies are dead, an epileptic mother with burnt arms is slowly dying and three people have recently been diagnosed with tuberculosis. In addition, there has been a bit of political unrest as of late due to the government's promise to give ex-civil defense patrols their back pay for services rendered during the 36-year armed insurgency. Since the government is strapped for cash, the current party in power is looking for ways to avoid paying the \$2700 they promised each of these former soldiers. The FRG, Guatemalan Republican Front, is trying to blame their inability to pay on opposition parties and "human rights groups" that harass them and criticize them. What is even more disturbing than this pathetic attempt at scapegoating is that a few of these *ex-patrulleros* actually believe this baloney.

On January 26, 2003 President Portillo's government stepped over the line when a presidentially appointed governor from Quiché province spoke to people in Iloam about the reasons why the ex-soldiers had not yet been paid. He specifically mentioned a group called CALDH, Center for Human Rights Legal Action as one of the forces impeding the process of delivering the back pay to the ex-PACs. This is the same group that the witnesses in my community are working with in their genocide case against former dictators Efraín Ríos Montt and Romeo Lucas García!

The human rights community responded to this inflammatory rhetoric by issuing an Urgent Action to its members. Amnesty International and NISGUA, the Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala, encouraged its members to write letters to the Guatemalan president and send copies to the US ambassador to Guatemala and local newspapers. Since the letter-writing campaign began, I have not heard of any more incidents of government officials blaming human rights groups for the FRG's inability to deliver the money. If you didn't get a chance to write a letter after reading my last report, I am offering you a 2nd opportunity to increase the safety of the people I work with as well as my own personal safety as I continue to monitor human rights in

the Ixil area during a presidential election year. If you know anything about Guatemalan politics, you know they are dirty. Bribery, threats, misappropriation of government funds, voter intimidation, and political killings are not uncommon in Guatemala, the country our government likes to call a “democracy.”

The details of whom to write to and what to say can all be found on the following web page www.nisgua.org and once you click on the Action Alert button, you will see a March 2003 posting entitled “Guatemalan government threatens human rights organization.”

Thanks for taking time out of your war-watching schedule to read about another part of the world that deserves some attention as well.

Poverty, hate, or greed can lead us to war, but cooperation and justice are needed for peace,

Rick Clifford

