

CAMINOS Newsletter - September 2003

Dear Friends and Family,

Whew! Home at last. Time to kick off my shoes, shed this greasy MacDonald's uniform, sprawl out on the couch, and hunt down the remote. Aahhh, now this is the life.

[CLICK](#). "23-year-old Rachel Corrie, an American peace activist, was crushed to death by an Israeli tank in Palestine's Gaza..." [CLICK](#). "Three US soldiers were killed in a gun battle on the outskirts of Baghdad this morning..." [CLICK](#). "Sammy Sosa went 3 for 4 last night..." [CLICK](#). "July 25, 2003. Welcome to the No-Spin Zone. I'm Bill O'Reilly..." [CLICK](#). "Now this looks like a job for me, so everybody just follow me, cos' we need a little controversy, cos' it feels so empty without me..." [CLICK](#). "Supporters of ex-dictator wore ski masks, carried clubs, firearms, and machetes and chased reporters, businesspeople, and bystanders in various parts of Guatemala City yesterday. They were protesting the Supreme Court of Justice's decision to stop the Supreme Electoral Tribunal from including Efraín Ríos Montt's name on November's presidential ballot."

Hmm, Ríos Montt. Isn't he that war criminal Rick's been writing me about?

"One journalist died of a heart attack as he attempted to escape the angry, hooded mob. Others were beaten and saw their cameras and video equipment destroyed by rioters. The mayhem ended at noon today when Ríos Montt himself called for an end to the protests and Guatemalan president Alfonso Portillo sent the anti-riot police to restore order in the city. Ríos Montt's political party, the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG), denies having organized the vandals although there is evidence that FRG elected representatives provided food, transportation, and portable toilets for the marauders. As for Ríos Montt's candidacy, it's anyone's guess how things will turn out. But one thing is nearly certain: if the FRG is not allowed to put their General's name on the November ballot, the party's supporters will use violence to voice their displeasure or take the election into their own hands. Roger Simons, CNN News, Guatemala." [CLICK OFF](#).



A Mayan ceremony offers candles and flowers to 'Madre Tierra.'



July 18 protest at the Constitutional Court opposed the candidacy of Ríos Montt.

Guatemala.” [CLICK OFF](#).

That does it. I’m going to write an email to the Guatemalan President right now! OK, what is that guy’s email address? Oh yeah, mensajes@presidenteportillo.gob.gt and while I am at it I should cc: the US Ambassador in Guatemala AmCitsGuatemala@state.gov. I think I’ll send a hard copy to the Guatemalan Ambassador to the US. - [Ambassador Antonio Arenales Forno, Embassy of Guatemala, 2220 R. Street NW, Washington DC 20008](#). Maybe I’ll just call him at (202) 745-4952 or fax him at (202) 745-1908 and give him a piece of my mind.

Yes, the FRG-sponsored riots did occur on July 24 and were briefly mentioned on CNN. No, the person working at McDonald’s is not someone I know personally. But then again, since 2.7 million Americans have lost their jobs over the past two and a half years, I guess one of you might be that person. The last time I checked, my friends were working as professors, teachers, activists, doctors, dentists, nurses, electrical engineers, computer software engineers, environmental consultants, psychologists, organic farmers and landscapers, businesspeople, webpage designers, accountants, health care professionals, sports coaches, anthropologists, rocket scientists, stay-at-home moms and dads, factory foremen, pastors, priests, and even lawyers. Because we are all members of the working class, the threat of being downsized is all too real for most of us. We put in long hours; we are extremely busy; and we all want to live in a world with less violence and more ecological stability. So how do we get there?

Don’t expect solutions to come from our elected officials. They cater to rich campaign contributors and their lobbyists. Don’t expect solutions to come from the media. They get their advertising revenue from transnational corporations and from political candidates running for office. Don’t expect solutions from the corporations either. They focus on marketing their products to our insecurities and maximizing their profits. It is up to grassroots people outside this triangle of power to make these entities do our bidding by voicing our opinions, voting out crooked politicians, joining consumer boycotts, attending protests, donating money to environmental and social justice organizations, and curbing our conspicuous consumption.

Some people have told me I must be an idealist, an adventurer, a humanitarian, or a bleeding heart to work for environmental and social justice. Not really. I do this work for the same reason that people in a boat riddled with holes bale water: they know the boat will sink if they do nothing. Not so long ago I was one of those top-deck-of-the-Titanic people who danced, drank champagne, ate too much, played shuffleboard and conveniently ignored the cries for help rising up from the drowning

masses trapped in the lower decks. One day in 1996 I strolled away from the party and saw what was going on below. Now I am back encouraging others to go down and take a look for themselves.

Friends, I have got some bad news. It's time for those of us on the top deck to put down our champagne glasses and stop fawning over the rich and famous at the party. According to the World Bank, 1.2 billion people on the ship are drowning in extreme poverty - "living" on less than a dollar a day. Another 1.6 billion can barely tread water on just two dollars a day. 2.8 billion people is nearly 50% of the world's population! Here the Institute of National Statistics reports that 56% of Guatemalans live in poverty. 82% of this group live in rural areas like Ilo and Xix. The families I worked with down here are part of that 2.8 billion. The distance between rich and poor grows daily, and sadly, American and European consumers are wreaking havoc on the environment as well as the Global South.

Let's Talk about Oil

I can't resist comparing the oil consumption habits of the 3000 people in Ilo with the approximately 3000 people living in my family's hometown of Colby/Abbotsford. Ilo has 3 pick-up trucks that provide all the town's transportation needs, 7 gas-burning molinos, or mills, used to grind the corn that is then made into tortillas, and 2 generators- one for the electric guitar amplifiers used during Evangelical church services, the other for the kung-fu cinema. Ilo's total consumption of gas comes to less than gallons a day. 30

On an average day in the towns and townships of Colby and Abbotsford the people use gasoline for their estimated 800 cars, 500 lawnmowers, 200 tractors, 75 motorcycles, 71 chainsaws, 62 four-wheelers, 43 motor boats, 39 generators, and 19 leaf blowers. According to the owners of the six local gas stations, people there purchase 1350 gallons of gas per day, 45 times more than the people in Ilo. (This does not include the gas needed by the school district to transport students nor the gas used to deliver food that travels 1200 miles on average before reaching the supermarket shelves.)

The editors of the World Press Review www.worldpress.org stated in their February 2003 issue that global oil consumption is currently around 72 million barrels a day and predict it will reach 90 million barrels a day by the year 2010. They also said that there are 1,000,000,000,000 (trillion) barrels of easily accessible oil available to be drilled, piped, shipped, and sold to consumers. If 90 million barrels of oil are consumed daily, all the earth's oil will be in the air, the oceans, the groundwater, the landfills, and our lungs by the year 2036. That is unacceptable to me, and I hope it is

unacceptable to you as well.

If we in the Global North, i.e., the US, Canada, Europe, Russia, and Japan, can switch from oil, coal, and uranium to hydrogen, solar, and wind energy technologies within 10 years, we will put the brakes on global climate change. If it takes 20 years, crop failures will increase, as will food prices, famine, and “natural” disasters. If we are still using 90 million barrels a day 37 years from now, “most of the world’s forests will begin to die.” (Z Magazine, 2/2003, p.35). The sooner we move to clean energy, the better it will be for today’s children and the natural world that will sustain them. If the oil companies are hell bent on selling all that oil, the least we can do is follow Ilom’s example and consume less of it. That way the Earth will have more time to filter the waste products associated with it.

Good Ain’t Good Enough

Before coming to Guatemala in January of this year I thought I was a pretty good person. As someone who drove a fuel-efficient car, contributed \$150 a month to environmental and social justice causes, bought mostly vegetarian food at the supermarket, and participated in local politics and protests, I believed I was a responsible global citizen. These past six months living with the rural poor and politically persecuted Mayans of Guatemala made me realize that I have to take it to another level if I plan to live sustainably and responsibly.

For example, in Ilom people mainly eat the food they grow locally. They grow organic coffee under nitrogen-fixing trees that provide shelter for many of the birds in this area and prevent soil runoff and evaporation. The farmers here use no fossil fuels during the growing, harvesting, depulping, and drying processes associated with coffee. Nearly every farmer walks to and from his fields; the others ride their horses. They sell their coffee at fair trade prices to conscientious consumers in Europe through an association that is mainly run by Mayan people. The people in Ilom and Xix who have volunteered to be witnesses in the genocide cases against ex-dictators Rios Montt and Romeo Lucas Garcia have done more and risked more for the cause of global social justice than 99.9% of Americans ever will. The people here are friendly, generous with what they have, and very welcoming. Were it not for their rapid population growth due to women’s inadequate access to medical care and education, Ilom would be a good model for sustainable living in the Global South.

During my time in Guatemala I have had moments where I felt the situation was hopeless - not just for the poor but also for the rich in this country and my own. Greed and overconsumption create many neurotic, unhappy, and spiritually empty people. Part of the reason I decided to work for human rights in Guatemala was to face the reality that exists

south of the US border and avoid becoming one of those self-absorbed, American whiners.

The many enlightened activists I work with here in Guatemala have challenged me to become more active, better informed, and a better practitioner of my beliefs. Their criticisms were annoying at times but ultimately liberating. So in the vein of “practice what you preach,” I have resolved to support my local farmer’s market, never buy another gas-powered car, eat more organic food, buy more fair trade products, read and watch more non-corporate media, , live more simply, encourage others to find out what’s going on, and demand more of myself and my government. I want to live more by my principles and less by a set of short-term, selfish interests that are drilled into my head by savvy corporate marketers.

Looking Back on the Experience

When I am no longer in Guatemala, these are the things I will miss most:

- Listening to the witnesses tell stories about what happened during the armed conflict
- Being part of a historic case where Mayan campesinos are bringing ex-dictators to justice
- Hanging out with the Cuban doctors Jorge, Biurka, Alexi, and Lili
- Eating Rosa’s, Magdalena’s and Maria’s handmade corn tortillas and boshbol.
- Hearing Antonio’s empassioned stories about hunting tepisquintles and andasolos
- Listening to Malakias and Juana sing songs they learned at school,
- Talking in English to my friend Isaac Del Valle, a 12-year-old local linguist
- Teaching 10-year-old Angel Ramirez how to play checkers and put puzzles together
- Eating black beans with super spicy red chiles and bananas picked fresh from the tree,
- Seeing the sun peek over the ridge each morning and light up the lush green coffee, cardamom and corn fields on the Western side of the valley,
- Throwing the frisbee around at the town’s soccer field with Mario, Ventura, and friends
- Eating chocolate chip banana bread and blackberry liquados at Descanso in Nebaj
- Listening to Radio for Peace International on short wave radio. See <http://www.rfpi.org/>.
- Hiking up the hill to the nearby town of Las Brisas and Campo Alegre

- Having coffee and bread and chewing the fat on Don Tino's porch near the plaza
- Reading books by candlelight after dark
- Taking a shower under the pristine waterfall just 10-minute's walk from the plaza
- Riding in the back of William and Mingo's reliable 1998 Land Rover
- Hanging out with companions from Europe and Canada once a month at Esteban's house
- Picking cool, ripe blackberries early in the morning in Xix and eating them straight away
- Going to bimonthly meeting in places like Antigua and Monte Rico to discuss what's happening in Guatemala and in our communities and to unwind for a few days
- Eating lentils at Café Europa and vegetarian lasagna at Rey Sol's in Guatemala City.
- Giving "elevator lifts" to Katarina and Miguel's children and grandchildren
- Hooping it up with the boys and girls at the new basketball court in Xix.
- Listening to the rain pound on the lamina, the sheet metal roof, as I lie quietly on my bed
- Watching the spectacular lightning shows that come bearing down on us from the Ixcán
- Hiking up to Xix from Rio Azul and taking in the gorgeous mountain views
- Taking a hot shower twice a month at my surprisingly clean \$2.50 a night hotel in Nebaj
- Seeing a witness who survived months of torture laugh and play with his grandchildren

What I Won't Miss:

- Drinking water with grapefruit seed extract, the bitterest substance known to man
- Getting amoebas and a fever at the same time and hallucinating in bed
- Having to go to the bathroom 20 times during a 24-hour diarrhea marathon
- Listening to the rats that run around in the attic every night between midnight and 5 a.m.
- Eating a "deep fried" egg
- Seeing old batteries thrown on the ground and opened up by children using them as toys
- Washing clothes by hand and hanging my boxer shorts on a clothesline in the town plaza

- Marimba bands setting up outside our front door and playing until 11p.m.
- Obnoxious drunks knocking on the neighbor's door asking for more "firewater" at 2a.m.
- Killing the mosquitoes that gets past our window screen and go straight for my ears
- Hiking up what seems like Mount Everest to get to Pedro and Mingo's houses for dinner
- Riding in the back of a pickup during a rainstorm
- Riding for 7 hours in a school bus designed for 54 occupants but packed with 70 people
- Getting up at 3:45 a.m. to catch the 4:30 a.m. pickup that arrives in Nebaj at 8:30 a.m.
- Listening to two drunks in Xix calling us names and telling us to go home
- Getting a ride to Ilom in Florindo's 1978 hunk of junk Land Cruiser with sketchy brakes
- Evangelical amplified music blaring out of a nearby church three days a week
- Dropping clothes I have just washed onto the filthy ground in the plaza
- Seeing FRG politicians come to Ilom and attempt to buy the people's votes
- Feeling a flea crawl up my leg as I am just about to fall asleep
- People staring into our window and talking about us as if we were zoo animals
- Drinking warm sodas from the tiendas, or shops, in Ilom
- The cat jumping from the dirt floor to the food preparation table and licking the food
- Smelling the acrid smoke that comes from people using an old rubber boot as firestarter
- Hearing about another infant in Ilom who died needlessly from fever and diarrhea
- Seeing older men who are so skinny from working so hard and having so little to eat
- Reading about all the corruption that is part and parcel of Portillo's FRG government

Corrections

A typo occurred in the June newsletter published by CAMINOS. The death threats against the Ilom witnesses who work with the Center for Human Rights Legal Assistance, CALDH occurred on April 27 rather than April 7. Accompaniers left community on the morning of April 29 and returned on May 5 with representatives from CALDH and several government entities.

In addition, I reported that 80% of the “school-aged” children attended the local elementary school. According to the Director of Teachers in Ilo, only 60% of the children are enrolled in the K-6 public school. Many of those children work in the fields to help their parents make ends meet. Some stay at home with their mothers and learn to cook and clean clothes.

Final Thoughts

Thanks again to all of you who have read my reports, written emails, letters, or faxes to the Guatemalan government, and/or contributed money to groups that are working for peace and justice in Latin America and elsewhere. Keep it up! Muchas gracias to my parents, my brothers and my sister who have helped me in so many ways. Special thanks to the members of the CAMINOS committee who sent me CARE packages and words of encouragement. I'd also like to thank Denise Peine for editing the CAMINOS newsletter. To friends and family who sent off an email, fax, or letter for the first time, drop me a note. I want to know if I reached my goal of adding 10 new people to the peace and justice movement.

And because many of you kept me in your thoughts and prayers during these six months, you can take comfort knowing that they were effective. I only ask that you continue praying, thinking about, and working with the Mayan people as they fight their historically unprecedented battle against the former Guatemalan military high command and two ex-dictators responsible for the murder of tens of thousands of Mayans between the years 1979 and 1983.

If anyone wants to read my previous reports about Guatemala or see where I will be giving slideshow presentations, go to <http://www.denjustpeace.org> and click on the CAMINOS icon. I look forward to seeing or hearing from you all sometime soon.

Turn off the TV, grab a bucket, and let's bail some water,

Rick

“You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.”

- Bob Dylan's Subterranean

Homesick Blues

