

CAMINOS Newsletter - December 2003

Ixcán, Guatemala

Hello All,

It has only been slightly more than a month since I arrived in Guatemala City, but I have been traveling a lot and done much, so it seems as though I have been here longer. Also, the first round of elections has passed without major upheaval, (there were some assassinations and other incidents of election related violence) and it seems as though much of the tension that existed before the election has dissipated.

Rios Montt, one of the former dictators charged with genocide by the witnesses with whom we live, had, by fraudulent means, entered into the presidential race. Although Montt's Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG) party won many congressional and mayoral seats, Montt was solidly defeated in the presidential race. As former head of congress, Montt enjoyed political immunity from prosecution. He will now lose that immunity, but due to the dysfunctional Guatemalan legal system that seems almost unable to deliver justice, we are not expecting his case to come to trial anytime soon.

After arriving in Guatemala City on October 30th, I traveled to Quetzaltenango, a city of about 150,000 inhabitants and second largest in the republic, to study Spanish for two weeks and visit with close friends that I had made there last year.

November 1st is All Saints Day in Guatemala, which means that graveyards come alive as everyone spends that day there painting, decorating, and placing flowers on the tombs of their relatives and flying kites. The tradition also involves eating an enormous lunch that is a mix of meats and vegetables, called "fiambre" and leaving an extra plate for those who have passed on. I am not sure where the tradition comes from and it seems to transcend religious and ethnic barriers.

After my time in Quetzaltenango, I participated in further job training in the capital, during which we discussed all aspects of our work, including health, life in the rural communities, history of the war, an analysis of the present political situation, security protocol of the organization etc. We were able to work with the legal group that is taking testimony and preparing the genocide cases against Rios Montt and Lucas Garcia.

As trainees, we also met with a group of psychologists who work with survivors of massacres and torture victims. Their discussion has hopefully given us some insight that will help us to be more effective and sensitive listeners while living alongside people who have suffered enormously but often choose to share their stories with us, as we are supporting their struggle for justice.

I am currently in the warm, raining, Ixcán region filling in for other companions who are traveling. I will return to Guatemala City within the next two weeks for a meeting, after which I will travel to the highland Ixil region, where I will be working more permanently. The climate in the Ixil villages is less typical of what many of us might think of Guatemala. There, it will be

cool during the days and even freezing at night do to the elevation.

As for the future of the nation, or at least the presidential elections, there will be a second round on the 28th of December. Since no candidate received a majority of the vote, the two front runners, Oscar Berger and Alvaro Colom will participate in the run-off elections. While Colom talks a more populist discourse and it is obvious that Berger is backed by the oligarchy and big business interests, there is some worry that Colom's National Unity Party UNE is too weak to stand on its own and if elected will be able to govern only with the support of the FRG.

That is to say the while Colom's campaigning seems to suggest that he is willing to work against corruption, resist signing exploitative free trade deals that would give what remain of Guatemala's national resources to multinational companies, and fight for the average Guatemalan, he would have to accept the support of Rios Montt's party and compromise his populist ideology.

Hopefully this update has given you all a small glimpse into Guatemala. I will be sure to include more about my daily life here and explain more specifically about the region where I will be and the history of the villages of Xix and Ilom where I will stay.

Look for an update from me at the beginning of February.

Best Wishes, Brad