

CAMINOS Newsletter - June 2003

Denver area resident and DJPC member Rick Clifford has been a human rights accompanier in Guatemala for five months, living in the indigenous communities of Xix and Ilom. In the following letter, Clifford describes the troubled human rights situation on a national and local level.

Dear Friends and Family,

We're in the 4th Quarter of a high stakes divisional match-up between two teams who have little affection for one another. Army still leads Civil Society, but it's anybody's guess who will come away victorious. The instant replay official has just reversed the field judge's decision to penalize three Army players for unsportsmanlike conduct. As a result of Army's illegal hit, Civil Society has lost one of its key defenders, Myrna Mack. Earlier in the game Army took out Juan Gerardi, C.S.'s moral and spiritual leader, with a vicious blow to the head. There is evidence that Army's coaches ordered their players to carry out these cheapshots, but the referees are afraid to penalize them for fear of personal reprisals. Meanwhile, the crowd of Civil Society fans have become disgusted with the officiating and want to see Army sanctioned for their blatant misconduct, violent behavior and intimidation of the referees.

What I have just described is not a football game but is instead the real battle being waged in Guatemala between human rights activists who want to create a democratic, civil society and the Guatemalan military who want to maintain their power over the people. The Army does not hesitate to threaten or kill judges and human rights activists who dare to challenge them. Not surprisingly, civil society has suffered a number of setbacks this year but none greater than the appellate court decision to free three convicted Army officials that were found guilty of orchestrating the murder of anthropologist and activist Myrna Mack. In the case of Bishop Juan Gerardi, a man who bravely spoke out and wrote about the Army's role in the deaths of over 180,000 civilians during the 36-year armed conflict, a similar setback occurred when three men had their murder convictions overturned. Fortunately, in the Gerardi case the guilty remain in jail while the courts decide how to proceed with the next round of appeals.

It is becoming clear to many people that the justice system in Guatemala is extremely unreliable and easily manipulated from within. In an effort to strengthen the judicial system in Guatemala and simultaneously attract more football fans to the issue of justice and human rights in Guatemala I am encouraging people to view Guatemalan politics like a high stakes football game - to cheer for the underdog, to boo the bad calls made by the officials, to talk at the office water cooler on Monday morning about the "game," to pore over articles about Guatemala in the newspaper, to talk about Guatemala on talk radio shows, and/or to write impassioned Letters to the Editor and emails to the Commissioner, or in this case the Guatemalan President, berating him for all the cheapshot that have gone unpunished and unnoticed by him

and his advisors. If 10% of the people around the world who watch football begin supporting Guatemalan Civil Society, I am sure corruption, impunity, and the corrupt Guatemalan Army will go down in defeat.

From where I am standing it appears Guatemala's Civil Society is losing the battle in the trenches because they have been outmaneuvered, outgunned, outmuscled, and outspent. As a result, instead of cutting funding to the military as the 1996 Peace Accords prescribe, the government increased this year's military budget by 23%. Instead of rooting out corruption, the Attorney General's office forces honest government employees like Karen Fischer, who investigate high profile corruption cases, to resign and flee the country in fear for their lives. Instead of carrying out land reform and paying reparations to the victims of state-sponsored violence, the government pays ex-Civil Defense Patrollers (ex-PAC's), many of whom committed heinous crimes against civilians. And finally, instead of spending Social Security revenues on patients in need of medical treatment, health care officials recently ENRON'ed, or embezzled, US \$30 million to make-believe, offshore holding companies while patients in Guatemala suffered and/or died.

War Criminal for President?

Meanwhile, as the presidential elections officially get under way, an ex-dictator and alleged war criminal by the name of Efraín Ríos Montt prepares himself to be the presidential candidate for the FRG, the Guatemalan Republican Front. Ríos Montt: a general who ruled from 1982-1983 when 192 military massacres resulted in over *10,000 civilian deaths*, a man who truly believes God is on *his* side, a man who by comparison makes Slobodan Milošević and Saddam Hussein look like second-rate street thugs. Now he wants to be elected president.

A shred of good news (for all of you who would rather see this man behind bars than behind the chief executive's desk in the Presidential Palace) is that the Spanish courts have agreed to hear Rigoberta Menchú Tum's case against Montt for his role in the deaths of several Spanish nationals during a military raid on the Spanish Embassy in 1983. Rigoberta, the winner of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize, hopes to connect the Embassy massacre to other massacres that occurred during Montt's Reign of Terror. The key for prosecutors is to show that the dictator ordered his military to use indiscriminate and excessive lethal force during the Embassy raid and possibly connect this behavior to the raids perpetrated in villages across the country.

So what does all this mean for indigenous Mayans, including the witnesses we accompany in Ixil and Xix, who want to put this monster on trial for crimes against humanity and genocide? If he runs for the presidency and wins in November, it will be extremely difficult and dangerous to move forward with this case. However, several analysts believe Montt's candidacy is just a publicity stunt designed to attract attention both inside and outside of the country. The FRG wants to gain sympathy amongst voters who look at the international condemnation of

Montt's candidacy as an attack on Guatemala's sovereignty. These analysts say it is unlikely that Montt will actually be the FRG's candidate. Instead, he will probably hand over that task to one of his underlings and maintain his judicial immunity by running for and winning a seat in the Congress. If he is found guilty in the Spanish court, there is a small chance that he would be extradited to that country to serve his prison term.

For social justice activists and football fans alike this year's presidential election is worth following. It could determine whether Army or Civil Society wins the right to create Guatemala's future. Unfortunately, the Army has allied itself with the three most powerful political parties: the FRG, PAN, and the Democratic Christians. The only candidate many of us find palatable is an articulate, reform-minded mayor of Quetzaltenango named Rigoberto Quemé, running with ANN, the New Nation Alliance. As is so often the case, his party has limited resources, and he is not widely known around the country. But just as the New England Patriots surprised us with their Super Bowl victory in 2002, perhaps Quemé can do the same in 2003.

Connect the Dots

I have just finished reading an excellent but sobering book by William F. Schulz, Executive Director of Amnesty International USA. It's called *In Our Own Best Interests: how defending human rights benefits us all*. This is a must-read for human rights activists and concerned citizens who are trying to convince friends and family that improved human rights in other countries creates a safer world for US citizens and a healthier environment in which to raise their children.

Schulz makes a convincing argument that improving human rights around the globe is a key ingredient to rooting out corruption in international business, reducing the number of environmental disasters like Chernobyl and Three Mile Island, and preventing the occurrence of genocides and ethnic cleansings like we saw recently in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. Improved human rights are good for our souls as well. Schulz says,

"...to look on human agony and consistently remain unmoved is to be dead in all the ways that truly matter, dead to the mystery of pulse and breath, dead to the gifts of grace and kindness, dead to the fragility of Creation."

So if people ask you, "Why should I care about international human rights?" You could tell them that caring is **essential** if they want the following: 1.) a stable pension fund, 2.) more transparent governments around the world, 3.) more accountable corporate and political leaders, 4.) stricter punishments for all government leaders who operate above the law, 5.) more people who are healthy and prosperous enough to purchase the goods and services they produce. Last but not least, if they want their children to live in a more **ethical** world, they should demand that human rights be provided to all humans regardless of economic status,

nationality, political affiliation, race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation.

Ilom Overheats

Do you remember in my last newsletter the description of the political divisions that exist within Ilom? Well, those divisions recently boiled over into what could have been a grave confrontation. On April 27 after several days and night of high heat and humidity, the irritable Mayor of Ilom received a visit from two police officers and was handed a letter written by the government's human rights investigation unit saying that a police investigation was being carried out in connection with alleged slanderous comments made by the Governor of Quiche to the ex-Civil Defense Patrollers of Ilom on January 26.

During his speech the Governor said that CALDH, the Center for Legal Rights Action, several opposition political parties, and other human rights organizations were impeding the ruling party's ability to provide the ex-PAC's with the backpay they had been promised in 2002. Ilom's mayor immediately called together the ex-PAC's and relayed the news about the investigation. The problem with this chain of events is that CALDH looked like they were to blame for the police investigation.

Adding fuel to the fire, the ex-PAC's see the Governor as an ally and were extremely upset that the government was investigating him and potentially *them* due to a letter written by the Director of CALDH.

According to two members of our witness families who attended the emergency meeting, five of the hotheaded ExPACs suggested lynching the townspeople associated with CALDH. (In Guatemala lynching usually involves pouring gas over a person and burning them to death). Understandably, our two friends took offense at such talk and demanded that the exPAC's prove that CALDH was responsible for the nonpayment of the backpay. Since they had no proof, the threats were not carried out. A few days later the accompaniers left Ilom with the witnesses and stayed out of Ilom until May 5 when a meeting was convened in Ilom's plaza to dispel the rumors and clear up misunderstandings about the police investigation and the work done by CALDH.

After a closed door meeting of all the leaders of the various groups, a police representative from the provincial capital of Santa Cruz Quiche assured the crowd of nearly 200 people that there was no police investigation against anyone in Ilom. The former mayor of the nearby city of Chajul emphasized that CALDH has no jurisdiction over the process of paying the exPAC's their back wages. A representative of the Governor, the Human Rights Investigation Unit, and a representative of CALDH also declared to the audience that their meeting had been very productive and all sides had agreed to sign a document indicating they would not use violence against each other.

The role of the accompaniers was also discussed during the meeting and the opposing faction expressed its frustration with the unequal attention accompaniers pay those who work with CALDH. The irritable mayor even asked during this

meeting whether the accompaniers should be allowed to stay in their quarters or be thrown out. The silence that followed his proposal showed there was no support for such an action. Therefore, we are not too worried about being evicted by the mayor, but it may be time to go on a charm offensive to win the “hearts and minds” of people who support him generally.

Since May 5th the political climate has cooled down substantially and the threat against the witnesses has greatly dissipated; however, the traditional factions are still vying for power and the town gossip still lurks in the whispering shadows. As accompaniers and international observers our job becomes more difficult when rumors and gossip run wild. Regardless of all that, we try to be friendly to everyone we meet in town. Unfortunately, in a town of 3000 people we don’t always know who is a friend of the witnesses and who is against them. Most importantly, the divisions in this town are getting in the way of community development due to a profound lack of trust exhibited by the two main factions. The ones who suffer most are the children because the adults can’t seem to agree on much of anything. Hence, Ilom continues to operate without a middle school or a high school, without a trash disposal plan, without a women’s group, without a library, and without a city plan for the treatment of sewage.

Normally in Ilom

While all these threats make for exciting reading back home, the reality is that life moves pretty slowly in the “campo,” and on most days I see the men planting, growing or harvesting corn, beans, coffee, and cardamon while the women make tortillas, cook beans, boil up collard greens, fry eggs, heat up chicken and pasta soup, or prepare tamales for their families. On special occasions they butcher a turkey, chicken, or pig and make a meat and vegetable stew out of it, but most of the time the people here eat vegetarian.

The children in grades one through six go to primary school Monday through Saturday from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. under a system called “Plan 22.” The teachers stay in the community for the first 22 days of the month and then return to their homes in Nebaj, which is about 3 hours away by vehicle. Not all the children go to primary school, but I believe that over 80% of school-aged children attend school.

I and my fellow accompanier Jennifer, a former social worker soon headed for law school, continue to spend a lot of our time with the witness families - eating meals together, playing with their children, collecting information about local and national political developments, teaching a bit of ultimate frisbee, and building bonds of international solidarity and trust. During the hot part of the day we stay in our quarters and listen to the wind-up, shortwave radio that broadcasts BBC News, Amy Goodman’s *Democracy Now* and David Barsamian’s *Alternative Radio*. I felt a bit homesick the day I heard the speech Noam Chomsky gave in Boulder in early April, but it’s great being able to keep up with what’s happening in the world at

large as I try to make sense of the world down here.

And Then There's Xix

We also travel twice a month to another town that is participating in the genocide case against Rios Montt and Lucas Garcia. The town of Xix (Sheesh) is much smaller and much cooler than Ilom. Because it is relatively peaceful compared to Ilom, we only spend three or four days a month there visiting with the witnesses and their families. Recently, we have noticed logging trucks with the familiar BFI logo passing through Xix loaded up with lots of large pine and Douglass fir timber. The clearcutting that they are doing is just one byproduct of the government's inability to create or enforce a sustainable environmental plan. Jungle rainforest and mountain slopes covered in pine are sacrificed to make way for corn fields, coffee, and cardamon that hungry campesinos need to have in order to keep their families fed. Wild animals are often killed by Guatemalan campesinos because they are an additional source of protein that come with no immediate price tag attached.

There are enough Catch 22's, paradoxes, and ironies down here to make your head spin, but I have come to the conclusion that Guatemalans have as much to teach us about living simply, wasting nothing, and consuming carefully as we have to teach them about building a strong judicial system, preserving nature, and fostering the growth of the middle class.

One final thought for those of you who are interested in learning more about the genocide case against Rios Montt and Lucas Garcia, go to www.justicefor-genocide.org and there you will find a gold mine of information about the case. And for those of you who want to see what happened to many Guatemalan villages during the 1980's, please look for a copy of the film *Hija del Puma*. I recently saw it while I was visiting a Zapatista village in Mexico and found it to be painfully similar to the accounts of massacres that occurred in Ilom and Xix in 1982.

Therefore, whether you are a football fan or a peace activist, I hope you will actively cheer for Guatemalan Civil Society. They need your support now more than ever. And the consequences of an FRG/Army victory in November would be terrifying not just for Guatemalans. It would reinforce the idea around the world that crime *does* indeed pay. We cannot allow Rios Montt or anyone in the FRG to become president. What we need to do is put Rios Montt in jail for his wars crimes and his crimes against humanity.

“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” - Edmond Burke (1729-1797)

Rick Clifford

“Winning isn’t everything. It’s the *only* thing.” - Vince Lombardi (1913-1970)