

CAMINOS



A program of the Denver Justice & Peace Committee (DJPC), advocating for lasting peace and economic justice in Guatemala

CAMINOS' ninth human rights companioner, Heidi Gross, writes her third and final letter from the highland community of Ilom.

Dear Friends and Family,

This letter is proving harder to write than I had previously thought. Regretfully, this will be my last update from Guatemala, as I am due to finish my time here shortly. As a result, I'm feeling a mix of emotions as I make my preparations to return to the States. I must admit, I'm anxious to get back to my life at home where I have more control over things like my diet, health and time. Yet, I anticipate a strong culture shock as I try to integrate myself back into my former life. I assume it will be overwhelming to enter the grocery store for the first time, filled with any kind of packaged food or cosmetic any human being could ever imagine for themselves or even their pet; and I expect more than a little difficulty adjusting to a speed of life for which I have forgotten the purpose or necessity. Perhaps I never will be able to fully attune my experiences here with my life in the States.

Although in many ways I'm ready to return home, leaving the families wasn't easy. Saying farewell to the people who had so generously become my support system, shared their food, confidences, and tragic histories with me for six months was an emotional time. The relationships that I've been fortunate enough to share with the

community members have affected me and pushed me toward growth in ways of which I'm probably not yet aware.

In writing this letter, moments come back to me, such as long conversations in the dark after the candles had burned out. Trying to learn the complicated weaving process as an enormous, wet, muddy pig looking for corn under my chair toppled me over and trampled my weaving. All of the women passing by to the *molino* (corn mill) stopped to help me, but we were laughing so hard that none of us could fix the weaving. The silent ride out of the community in the back of a pick-up at 3am when no one was awake and the *luna tierna* sat high over the

mountains under a sky filled with so many clear, sharp stars it was dizzying. Most importantly though, are the witnesses' horrific personal experiences told to me in trust and confidence that have become alive for me and will continue to haunt my memory and conscience for as long as I can imagine.

Although most of my sentimental or memorable experiences have little to do with the genocide cases, there has been one notable advancement. In the nearby community of Plan de Sanchez, a small victory may have been won. The landmark decision of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled in favor of the victims of the 1982 massacre. The

decision marked the first time the state has been held accountable for the more than 600 documented massacres of unarmed civilians during Guatemala's



Genuine smile - From the DJPC archives

civil war. According to the Court ruling, the government will compensate the community for damages incurred for \$7.9 million. The money is supposed to be presented this coming Monday. We all wait here in anticipation.

The political situation within the communities where I worked, however, remains fairly static at the moment. No major headway has been made concerning the trials. Life continues as the waiting continues. We can only hope that the same reparations will be made for all of the communities and people affected by the violence of the past.

However, I ask myself, now that we are in the trial period and the government has taken an inkling of responsibility for a small portion of the inflicted brutality, has the violence truly ended? I would have to answer no to that. The Guatemalan and U.S. governments continue to encroach upon the people in the form of repression, denial of land rights, and imposed poverty, thereby threatening the indigenous populations' growth and sustainability. To me, these actions are forms of secondary violence, every bit as brutal as direct massacres in that both threaten the people's survival.

One recent, ominous event was Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's visit to Guatemala to announce the U.S. decision to resume military aid to Guatemala after 15 years of suspension. He also took the opportunity to urge the military to take a greater roll in internal security operations. This would specifically support a direct violation of the 1996 Peace Accords that ended Guatemala's 36-year internal conflict and were designed to downsize the previously tyrannical Guatemalan military. Even more formidable, is the military's reputation of strong ties



Mayan priest Don Nicolás © Jonathan Moller

to clandestine groups who frequently engage in illegal activities and continue to threaten and attack human rights activists and civil society groups. In May and June alone, our organization combined with other human rights organizations in Guatemala City suffered 73 break-ins and/or threats. In my opinion, the violence of instilling fear, of threatening, of attacking continues. Not to mention the lingering peril of Guatemalans' jobs, land and livelihood as the possibility of the Central American Free Trade Agreement becomes ever more prominent.

In this culture where the word "conflict" doesn't exist within the Ixil language, *conflicto* has been borrowed from their oppressors and its meaning learned from the terror of the 70's and 80's. Will its connotation shift to include the experiences of the next decades? I cannot answer that. Nor will I ever be able to find a moral explanation for the violence. It has been my experience, though, despite continued adversity within their daily lives, the indigenous people of Guatemala as a whole display incredible courage and perseverance. It is my hope that their inspiration and motivation to continue to pursue justice will not be stifled, no matter how long the wait or how difficult the struggle.

Because my experiences were too full for any number of letters to encompass, I will say good-bye here, dedicating this quote to all those I have met and worked with during these short 6 months, and to all those whose lives have been affected by Guatemala's internal conflict:

*These are experiences felt in one's own flesh,
Scenes seen and heard from the refuges
and trenches.
Hope and the desire to struggle are not lost,
to the contrary,
they are reborn like the grains of corn which
give life to our families, our people....*
- Informador Guerrillero

Cuidense mucho,
Heidi

P.S. I would also like to express my gratitude one last time for all those who have supported my work and the victims of the violence here in Guatemala. Your letters, emails, prayers and financial contributions gave me much needed support and made the effort conjoint. Again, thank you.

If you are interested in learning more about human rights accompaniment in Guatemala please contact:

Denver Justice & Peace Committee
(303) 623-1463; djpc@denjustpeace.org;
www.denjustpeace.org;
901 W. 14th Avenue, Suite 7, Denver, CO 80204

TAKE ACTION!

CALL YOUR CONGRESS MEMBERS IN SUPPORT OF HR 1217 "The Latin America Military Training Review Act of 2005."

The purpose of HR 1217 is to: *Suspend the authority for the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC)--the successor institution to the United States Army School of the Americas (SOA)--in the Department of Defense, and for other purposes. HR 1217 would suspend and investigate WHINSEC/SOA for a period of time.*

For more information and directions on this action, visit www.soaw.org

Guatemala and the School of the Americas (SOA) Graduates of the School of the Americas (SOA) have committed some of the most egregious human rights abuses in Guatemala's bloody history, including torture, murder, disappearances, displacement, and genocide. The School of the Americas trained over 1500 Guatemalans between 1946 and 1995 including the following individuals:

Efraín Ríos Montt

On June 6, 2001, massacre survivors from 11 Mayan communities filed a lawsuit against SOA graduate and former dictator of Guatemala **Efraín Ríos Montt**. The charges were for genocide of the Mayan population under Ríos Montt's brutal dictatorship in the early 1980's. The "scorched earth" campaign left at least 19,843 people dead and over one million internally displaced, most of them Mayan civilians. Six out of nine cabinet officials under Ríos Montt were graduates of the SOA.

Fernando Romeo Lucas García

In June 2000, 10 communities filed a genocide lawsuit against former dictator and SOA graduate

Lucas García. Along with his brother Benedicto Lucas García, also an SOA graduate, and former Army Chief of staff, Lucas García masterminded the civil defense controls (PAC) responsible for thousands of atrocities against Mayan civilians, leaving at least 6,469 dead. Four of eight military officials in the cabinet of Lucas García were graduates of the SOA.

Assassination of Bishop Juan Gerardi

Another SOA graduate **Byron Lima Estrada**, former head of the notorious G-2 military intelligence unit and former member, along with two other military officers, was found guilty in the 1998 assassination of Bishop Gerardi. Bishop Gerardi was killed 2 days after releasing the REHMI report, which identified the military as the major perpetrator of human rights violations during the 36-year civil war.

SOA Graduates in the Guatemalan Military Intelligence Agency (D-2 or G-2)

Three top leaders and many officials of the Guatemalan intelligence agency D-2 (also known as G-2) were SOA graduates. SOA graduates include three D-2 directors, Francisco Ortega Menaldo, Cesar Augusto Cabrera Mejia, Manuel Callejas y Callejas. Additional SOA graduates in leadership positions include Federico Sobalvarro Meza, Cesar Quinteros Alvarado, Luis Felipe Caballeros Meza, Harry Ponce, Francisco Edgar Dominguez Lopez, Eduardo Ochoa Barrios, Domingo Velasquez Apxuac and Jose Manuel Rivas Rios.

- ◆ *For Representatives: Co-sponsor HR1217, sponsored by Rep. McGovern, that calls for the suspension and investigation of the SOA/WHINSEC. Have them call Rep. McGovern's office for more information.*
- ◆ *For Senators: Introduce companion legislation in the Senate that would call for the suspension and investigation of the SOA/WHINSEC.*

For more information on the SOA-Guatemala connection, visit Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala:

http://www.nisgua.org/articles/school_of_the_americas.htm

CAFTA-DR UPDATE

Implementation of the Central American-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement has been unilaterally delayed from its January 1, 2006, start date as the U.S. government continues to pressure signatories, including the Guatemalan government, to change intellectual property law, environmental standards, and labor regulations. Reforms to such laws constitute new threats for small- and medium-sized businesses. Meanwhile protests continue in signatory countries. Clearly the Administration believes they have these countries backed in to a corner and is taking advantage of the situation to leverage even more benefits for U.S. corporations," said Andrew de Sousa of the Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA). "The costs for Central Americans will be very high, and thus people continue to resist"

For more information, please visit STOP CAFTA: www.stopcafta.org and the Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA: <http://www.ghrc-usa.org/>

CAMINOS STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS GATHER FOR A PLANNING RETREAT



On January, 21 & 22, the CAMINOS Steering Committee gathered in Ft..Collins to reflect on the past ten years, to discuss the future of accompaniment and the Promesa project and to share in each other's solidarity and camaraderie.

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