



# CAMINOS

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

*CAMINOS is currently sponsoring Jordan Buckley, who traveled to Guatemala in July as our tenth human rights accompanier. Before leaving Jordan wrote the following letter describing the current situation in the Guatemalan Highlands.*

Hello friends, family, allies and loved ones,

As several of you know, I will be moving to the highlands of Guatemala in the coming weeks to work for the next year as a human rights accompanier for the genocide case there. Accordingly, I just want to give a quick heads-up of what exactly I'll be doing and ways that you can support me and our team's work, if you are so inclined.

Over the course of the armed conflict in Guatemala, which officially ended in 1996 with the Peace Accords, more than 200,000 people were either murdered or disappeared - the overwhelming majority being indigenous Maya. Despite findings of at least 626 massacres during this period, ex-dictator Efraín Ríos Montt, who came to power through a military coup in 1982, has yet to be punished for his crimes of strategic mass murder.

In fact, Ríos Montt - a friend of Pat Robertson who utilized the Christian Broadcasting Network to funnel in funds to his regime under the auspices of "development work" - served as president of the Guatemalan National Congress as recently as 2003, and may be a frontrunner in the next presidential elections.

Needless to say, in a political climate as chaotic as Guatemala's - a nation just smaller than Tennessee that nonetheless boasts a 2006 murder rate of 16 killings a day - Mayan massacre survivors attempting to hold accountable one of the nation's most influential players for mass murder is risky business. Particularly with the continued death threats and actual assassinations of local human rights activists there.

Accordingly, these brave individuals - willing to jeopardize their lives by testifying in the genocide case to end impunity for Ríos Montt - have

requested international accompaniers to live with them while they pursue this process.

The Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA), has responded to the witnesses' call for observers by providing accompaniment since 2000. The aim is to dissuade violent reprisals against witnesses by essentially implanting North American eyes and ears, and by

extension our social networks (i.e. all of you reading this newsletter), within these Mayan communities as they pursue justice.



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27 years of solidarity  
[www.denjustpeace.org](http://www.denjustpeace.org)

I will be living in two communities: Ilom - situated within the tallest mountain range in Central America - and Xix, a community that following the military massacre there in 1982, saw many of its residents flee into the mountains to resist capture for the following 14 years.

Part of our commitment to this work as companions is fundraising to cover our expenses while in Guatemala. If you are able to contribute financially (and by no means feel obligated, as we clearly play various roles in the collective struggle for social justice) please consider sending a (tax-deductible!) check to the Denver Peace and Justice Committee, who will be my "sponsoring community" as a part of the NISGUA network.

Much love and respect to all,  
Jordan Buckley

*Jordan's wrote his second letter after his arrival to Guatemala, and at the start of his honorable and memorable experience as an companioner.*

Hello friends, family, allies and others,

This is the first update on my recent move to the Guatemalan jungle to work as a human rights companioner with survivors of the state-led massacres against the Maya -- which extended from 1960-1996 -- as they courageously push forward charges of genocide against ex-presidents and military leaders in the national courts. I hope this note finds all of you well!

No top officials have yet been punished for their role in the brutal campaign that claimed the lives of more than 200,000 individuals. In fact, many of them

- particularly former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt who came to power via a 1982 military coup - remain incredibly powerful within Guatemalan politics;



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Ríos Montt, for example, served as president of the National Congress as recently as 2003 and enjoys substantial influence within the government to this day.

Due to the severity of the violence - the UN recognizes at least 626 massacres committed by the military against Maya communities - and the fact that impunity reigns for those responsible, talk of the genocide remains both scandalous and dangerous. As a result, witnesses in the cases have asked for companions to live with them while they brave the consequences for seeking justice against these powerful criminals.

As international observers for this case, we are tasked with serving as the so-called "eyes and ears" of the global community; accordingly, until next summer when I return, I will send out reports every two months outlining developments in the genocide case and some of my experiences within the rural, indigenous communities where I am living, particularly as they relate to the general human rights situation within Guatemala.

### **Dismantlement of a Taboo: The Guatemalan Genocide goes public**

The day after I arrived in Guatemala City, July 7th, Spanish courts unleashed a landmark decision: the issuance of international arrest orders for Ríos Montt, two other ex-presidents, and five other top military brass, lodged with Interpol to alert nations across the globe, in addition to ordering that the defendants' assets be frozen worldwide.

We have yet to see what this declaration really means in concrete terms but assume it signifies that they won't be leaving the safe haven of Guatemala anytime soon. Folks here tell me that it was the first time newspapers connected the names and faces of prominent figures to their heinous crimes. Finally, beneath phrases like "Wanted for Genocide" or "Orders for Capture," the images of well-known political barons were broadcast on the front page of every major publication, distributed on street corners, stacked in corner shops, kept on tables in cantinas and cafes, and hawked by the handful from peddlers in plazas and boys in bus terminals. It felt like an enormous secret had punctured the iron veil of impunity and power, and escaped... (but to where?).

## My New Home in Ilom

I am mostly living in a town called Ilom, situated deep in the hilly jungles of northwestern Guatemala, four bumpy hours from the nearest paved roads. Folks in Ilom speak Ixil, one of the twenty-three indigenous languages spoken in Guatemala. Roughly 600 families occupy various small wooden houses along the hillside that is Ilom - most contain dirt floors and, besides those which have a single tiny light bulb connected to a solar panel, none are equipped with electricity.

Common street goers in Ilom include: ragged horses bound with bags of corn; giant pigs (called "coches" by locals, humorously the same word for car); dogs, all with skin clinging to their ribcages; ducks; goats; men toting enormous stacks of firewood on their backs through a strap stretched across their forehead; women expertly balancing bowls of corn kernels on their heads; and children, dashing about with homemade kites (fashioned from corn chip bags with ratty scraps of plastic for a tail) vaulted to the sky, streaming faithfully behind them.

My accompaniment partner Katie - a sharp, hippie-raised woman from North Cali with experience in activism around forests, dams, land reform and feminism - and I, share a small room on the corner of the town plaza, a site that transforms into a small, bustling market on Sundays. There are seven families that have agreed to feed us - each day we rotate, eating all three meals at the same house. Each meal is cooked over an open flame and usually consists of a single serving of rice, beans, sauce-less pasta or two fried eggs, although on occasion they serve us steamed herbs and leaves from the jungle or tamales with salsa. Each of these comes with seemingly unlimited fresh made tortillas and a cup of coffee.

Since only the children, our peers and some older men speak Spanish, we've learned how to thank the women in Ixil for cooking for us: *Tawn tyoosh teen tal* (thanks for the food). Next month I will be taking a week of intensive Ixil courses and hope to move somewhat beyond casual greetings and mealtime niceties. After all, I tentatively plan to stay in Ilom for another 8 months.

## The Machete Fight & Slacker Imperialism

Last week, after traveling back from a human rights workshop with community members, we passed an emergency vehicle (a truck that read "Bomberos" meaning firefighters) transporting a man from Ilom whose friend, and alleged fellow gangbanger, repeatedly hacked him in the head and side with a machete in a drunken argument. At present, he is still hospitalized in a city six hours from Ilom, fighting to survive. If he doesn't pull through, some say that "community justice" may be served to his friend, specifically a mob lynching.

Two days later, upon a friend's request, I hopped on a horse and trekked with him into the wilderness, far from the community, where we spent the day plucking corn from stalks and loading them into large sacks. He mentioned that he had invited another fellow to join us. Soon I learned it was none other than the hospitalized man's friend. His neck was covered in scars, and a baseball cap concealed the deep slices leveled by his hospitalized friend a few evenings before. It was enlightening to work side-by-side with him, quietly contemplating his fate, ruminating about life in Ilom where police are non-existent and wondering which communities in Guatemala most resemble democratic governance: the cities filled with corrupt police and rampant impunity where the "justice system" is an enduring sham, or small towns like Ilom where systems of justice are rooted in improvisation and invoked only when deemed necessary.

The most visual impact of my presence in the town, I believe, is inspiring scores of youth to likewise appreciate the timeless arts of hackysack and frisbee. While young girls tend to hang out at the house with family, boys roam the streets freely - spinning tops, soaring kites, just hanging out. Lately, I have been inviting the stragglers outside of our window to join me on the soccer field or in front of our friend's shop. On the walk to either place, invariably one recruit quickly becomes four, four quickly turns into thirteen, until dozens of youngsters are exploring the novel games initiated by the strange light-skinned, tall guy (at a towering 5' 10) from the North. Many have instantly learned tricks for both sports, and it remains one of my favorite ways of passing time in Ilom.

### **Measuring Mass Murder in Miles Won't Work**

It's been uncomfortable struggling to make sense of the real disparity in public interest in acts of mass murder. More precisely, without wading too deeply into the morbid calculus of comparing death counts, consider the following: my home of Austin, Texas is closer (as the crow flies) to the jungles of Guatemala where I now reside than to Ground Zero in New York City. Yet, due to the social importance of nationalism -- i.e., a loyalty to a portion of humanity determined by common residence within a given border -- the political consequences of the cruel killing of an estimated 2,976 persons on September 11th, 2001, has overwhelmingly eclipsed the annihilation and forced disappearance of upwards of 200,000 persons in a region nearer to my childhood romping grounds than to the Big Apple.

Can borders truly diminish compassion for others, or, if not that, make certain atrocities substantially more visible and compelling in terms of galvanizing resolution for the injustice? If not borders, is it the victims' race, economic class, spoken language, or a mixture of all these? Are these qualities the stuff that borders are made of?

Still today Guatemala's genocide -- one of the bloodiest civil conflicts in the modern era of the Western hemisphere -- has hardly garnered our nation's sympathy and solidarity or, tragically, even penetrated our consciousness.

### **Growing Solidarity & Friendship**

Many thanks to all who have given kind words of support, provided essential money for the cause and made me to feel a welcome part of our family and community.

Much love and respect to all,  
Jordán

P.S. Here is a recently published article related to the unspoken genocide as well as HIJOS and their fight to revive the nation's memory and, in turn, demand justice; I'd encourage you to read it: <http://www.alternet.org/wiretap/39485/>.

P.P.S. Also, for those who are able to express solidarity with our all-volunteer accompaniment team's work through a financial contribution - which surely is very few of us - please consider sending a \*tax-deductible\* check to my sponsoring community: Denver Justice & Peace Committee, 901 W. 14th Avenue, Suite 7, Denver, CO 80204 (Checks should be written out to "DJPC Education Fund" with my name in the memo line.)

**The Denver Justice and Peace Committee  
CAMINOS Program  
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