

CAMINOS Newsletter - January 2004

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Guatemala City, Guatemala

Dear Friends and Family,

Finally, Brad's letter from Guatemala has arrived! You remember me, right? I know that you were all waiting so anxiously to hear how my work is going.

To briefly review, for those who do not recall my mission, I am working as a human rights observer with an organization called [NISGUA](#) (Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala). My specific mandate entails living in rural highland Guatemala in the Ixil (pronounced E-SHEEL) region in the towns of Xix (SHEESH) and Ilom (E-LOAM).

My partner Meredith Kruse and I spend our time living alongside witnesses involved in cases charging former Guatemalan dictators Lucas Garcia and Rios Montt with genocide. Our presence has been called for by the witnesses as a deterrent to threats against their personal security and a source of moral support.



Brad Lawton with his genocide case partner Meredith Kruse in Guatemala.
© Denise Peine

We serve as information channels between witnesses living in isolated communities and the outside world, both here in the capital and internationally. I have just completed a six-week stay in the communities and this letter will include both personal reflections on the experience and a very concise update on the genocide cases and larger political situation.

Arriving in Community

To arrive in Ilom one must travel six hours north in a remodeled school bus, what we call a "chicken bus" (they are the most common form of transportation), switching in Santa Cruz del Quiche, to arrive in Nebaj. From Nebaj it is possible to leave the next morning and travel for four to five hours, standing in the back of a four-wheel-drive pickup, often on top of cargo, and arrive in Ilom by early afternoon. The truck bends, dips, grunts, bounces, and careens; down, up, and along the sides of spectacular steep-sided mountains often covered in fields of corn and beans or cardamom, crossing rivers and passing through pastures, cloud forests, and small towns of adobe or log houses with corrugated steel or clay roofs. The ride is was often freezing cold and wet, but

that should change as the rainy season has ended and it will be dryer and warmer until July when the rains start again. Xix, the other community, is also set in the mountains, but requires only a twenty minute pickup ride from Nebaj and an hour and a half hike to arrive.

We spend about two weeks in Ilom and then pass two days in Xix, to check in and visit with witnesses, after which time we travel back out to Ilom. Every month or so we travel to the Guatemala City for meetings with our coordinators and observers working in other regions, sometimes we accompany the witnesses into the capital. They formed a national organization called the AJR (Association for Justice and Reconciliation), and hold periodic meetings in the Capital to meet with legal representatives at [CALDH](#) (Center for Human Rights Legal Action).

In 2000 the AJR, with the aid of CALDH, filed a criminal complaint against Rios Montt and Lucas Garcia, charging them with genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. I will not explain the legal arguments for these three separate charges, but I should point out that the majority of the victims of the war were people of indigenous Guatemalan (Mayan) descent and the AJR asserts that there was a systematic effort made by the military to eliminate Mayan culture and tradition.

In Xix, only three families are associated with the case, unlike in Ilom where we visit with over ten families, who are either witnesses or supporters. The two genocide cases involve witnesses of 23 massacres in 5 regions of Guatemala, but these represent only a glimpse of the genocide carried out in 1981-82 by the Guatemalan military as part of their counterinsurgency strategy in a civil war that lasted from 1962 to 1996.

The UN-sponsored Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) found that the armed conflict wiped over 600 communities off the map, left over 150,000 dead, and caused over 1 million people flee from their homes. CALDH estimates that 99.9% of all war crimes committed in Guatemala remain unpunished. Only two massacre cases have ever come to trial in the Guatemalan legal system and resulted in conviction.

Life in Rural Guatemala

Returning to my discussion of our daily life as accompaniers, we eat three meals a day with witnesses, their families, or folks who support the cases in other ways. Meals always include tortillas, formed from a dough of ground corn and water. Corn is central to the way of life of many Mayan groups, and the Ixil people spend much of their lives, growing, harvesting, drying, grinding, boiling, shaping, and baking corn into tortillas.

Meridith and I tried our hand at making tortillas and we find that it is not so simple to shape the small ball of dough into thin, circular discs and flop them onto the round sheet of metal, concave oil drum lids placed over open fires. I am often laughed at for my failed attempts, usually by Ixil men who find it funny to see a man attempting to assume what is often viewed as a woman's role.

I am also thinking of learning to weave, as Meridith is doing, but I am holding off until I find the right person to teach me. The Ixil women wear beautiful, brightly colored woven blouses and

skirts adorned with patterns and designs of bird or animal figures. Many people also weave handbags, table cloths, and other useful items. Men traditionally wore bright red jackets and white pants, but were forced to abandon these customs during the armed conflict and most men continue to wear factory produced clothing, T-shirts, etc., in order to assimilate more easily in the cities.



Ixil woman weaving.
© Barbara Millman

As for our ability to assimilate in rural Guatemala, it is lacking. First of all, we communicate in Spanish, which is a second language for us, and is spoken at varying levels by community members (many older folks and women do not speak any Spanish). Although we study Ixil, it would take many months of intensive study to reach a level needed to participate in daily discussions. This is to say that, at least for the moment, we are confined to Spanish with the exception of some basic phrases.

Aside from the language barrier, we are just way too white, too tall, and have too many fancy modern products, such as our backpacks, water bottles, and super-high-tech expensive-looking wristwatches (Timex). For our weirdness, we are constantly subjected to ridicule by groups of ten to twenty small children. They often yell, "buenas dias" or "buenas tardes", although which phrase is used has no correlation to the actual time of day. This can be disorienting. We respond or don't, as our behavior seems almost irrelevant. Then the children hoot "gringo" or simply screech out their best war whoops at us, at which point they win and we lose, or so it seems to us. Actually, we enjoy the children of the families that we know.

We live in the former health post, which is situated on the central plaza and is one of the few cinderblock, cement-floored buildings in town. We share space with the town's teachers, who are from the larger municipal center, Nebaj. A times one or two children will arrive and two our window while we are resting and we play games of checkers, read them stories, or make clay figures. So, it is only the large groups that are unmanageable stare at us as we might look at an exotic zoo animal that is to be examined with a mix of fear and amazement and commented on.

Our greatest challenge, aside from attempting to assimilate, is to maintain our health while eating a very limited range of food that sometimes contains amoebas or other intestinal parasites and harmful bacteria. So far, I have been healthy more than sick. Also, there is no electricity and limited running water in Ilom, so we are forced to wash our clothes and bath in the river. Also, we filter our water and use a latrine for a bathroom. The experience is a bit like camping for a very extended period of time.

Christmas and New Years

We passed the holidays in the communities, and missed home a lot. It was, however, interesting to share with people in Ilo and Xix. We were invited to eat as many of the delicious pork, beef, and chicken filled potato and corn tamales as we could stomach. The holiday is almost universally celebrated as nearly all people in the Ixil region were forced to abandon traditional indigenous ceremonies during the war and either already considered themselves catholic or adopted some form of evangelical Protestantism.

Customs are, however, quite different and people do not give gifts, because they have almost nothing material to give, and instead simply share time with family and friends and participate in religious events. The candy canes, Christmas trees, and nearly all of the rampant consumerism associated with the holidays in the States is absent.

In Xix we have the honor of accompanying, sixty-two-year-old Don Mauricio, who is a witness in the case and local leader of the catholic church. He hosted a “posada” in his home and later the group passed to the houses of others asking for entrance. The tradition represents Mary and Joseph’s search for a place of refuge where Christ would be born. During the ceremony, Don Mauricio spoke of his people’s flight from the terror of the army’s scorched earth policy and their search for refuge in the mountains and across the borders in Mexico and drew parallels with the stories of the Christian people in the bible.

Mauricio told us of how he fled into the mountains in 1980, lived with the communities of Population in Resistance, and attempted to escape army bombings and patrols. There, his wife and children died of starvation and the harsh conditions. He was captured, accused of being a guerrilla leader, and interrogated under torture for eight months. Don Mauricio maintains that he was not a guerrilla and recounts for us his arguments with military commanders, saying, “I am not a guerrilla. I am a peasant farmer and have always had to struggle and organize my community to survive and obtain a fair price for my work and crops, but I am a civilian, not a guerrilla.” He would not tell military where the populations were hiding in the mountains, and for that they beat him and burned his chest, back, genitals, and other parts of his body where scars remain visible today. Don Mauricio told them, “I am not a Judas nor a traitor. I will not sell out my people”. He is certain that it was with only God’s aid and guidance that he was able to survive, escape from the military camps, and return to the mountains.

The Elections

In Guatemala, 2003 was an election year. Elections were held in two rounds, the first on Nov. 9th and the second on Dec 28th. As November approached, tension built in the country and there was fear the widespread disorder would break out in the country if Rios Montt, one of the former dictators charged in the genocide case, did not win. Montt is the leader of the FRG (Guatemalan Republican Front), the party that has controlled the Guatemalan Congress and presidency for the last four years. Montt was barred from the 1996 and 2000 elections by an article of the 1985 constitution that prohibits participants of past military coups (Montt came to power through a coup in 1982) from running for office. In 2000, Alfonso Portillo, viewed by many as Montt’s puppet, won the presidential race.

During the last four years, the FRG packed the Constitutional Court with judges in its favor, and, this past July, the court decided with no legal basis, that Montt would be permitted to run in the November elections. On the 24th and 25th FRG party officials also bussed supporters into the capital and coordinated riots, apparently also involving youth gangs from the capital and the planned acquiescence of the National Police. The rioters targets buildings owned by the FRG's political opponents and aimed at intimidating journalists, one of whom was died of a heart attack while fleeing mob violence. Since May 15th, when the election process opened, at least 26 political leaders and activists were murdered and another 14 survived gunshots wounds, while scores have been intimidated. Also, some 20 journalists were killed or had there homes broken into and searched.

Despite the FRG's attempts to silence opponents through violence and willingness to buy votes through such schemes as promising payments, fertilizer, or solar panels to rural supporters, Rios Montt finished third in the Nov. 9th round of the elections and did not advance to the Dec. 29th round. While the nationwide tumult that some analysts anticipated did not occur at any point during the election process, the elections were marked by fraud and violence (vote burning and riots) in some municipalities.

Oscar Berger (pronounced BER-SHAY) of the GANA (Great National Alliance) beat Alvaro Colom for the presidency and took office Jan. 14th. Berger is a former mayor of the capital city and well known conservative. He is a large land and business owner and in favor or neoliberal trade agreements. While he is not a former genocidal dictator, he is also not a firm friend of Guatemala's poor majority and is not expected to be an ally in the genocide cases. Also, there is some cause for concern, as one of Berger's most powerful cabinet members, Otto Perez Molina, is a former head of Guatemala's High Presidential Command (EMP) and Army Intelligence (D-2), both of which functioned as death squads in during the armed conflict. Molina wields enormous power in the current government and espouses remilitarization of the country as a means to fight crime and youth gangs. CALDH and other human rights groups have expressed concern.

The Cases

Currently the genocide case against Romeo Lucas Garcia and his high military command is in the hands of the court in Nebaj. The decision to send the case to the departmental town was the decision of a judge in the capital and according to CALDH was based on a faulty reading of the case. While the courts allege that many of the investigations into the genocide case, carried out by the Public Ministry, were realized in the area around Nebaj, CALDH maintains that the crimes contained in the accusation were planned in the capital and were carried out in nearly all departments of the country. The legal team at CALDH has filed an appeal with the Supreme Court to have the case removed from Nebaj and returned to the capital.

The Rios Montt case could move forward, as the former General has lost the immunity that he enjoyed as head of congress under the last government, but CALDH will attempt to have both cases tried simultaneously in the Capital.

In closing, it is possible that the cases will move forward this year, at which point our presence

here as a security measure would be more vital. We cannot, however, expect too much of the legal system if we remember such as cases as that of anthropologist Myrna Mack or Catholic Bishop Juan Gerardi, who was killed in 1998 by the military after releasing a report attributing the overwhelming majority of violence during the war to the military. The cases of these famous leaders in Guatemala's struggle for democracy and justice stagnated for many years in the Guatemalan legal system.

Thoughts and Goals Upon Heading Back out to Community

We met with all of our co-workers and took a few days here in the capital to file reports, share information, and pig out on chocolate and tasty foods. Meridith and I will head back Nebaj in a few hours. I am looking forward to seeing our friends again and have hopes of spending more time up in the fields with people, picking coffee and cardamom, and planting corn.

One of my strongest hopes is that we can deepen our relationships with those we know. I hope to gain more insight into the lives of those with whom we share our time and hopefully be accepted by them as true friends, despite our privileged background and the fact that we come from a starkly different culture. I hope to do this by playing soccer. I just have to find shoes large enough for my feet. Playing soccer on the local team may help to make new friends and will keep me in shape. The greatest challenges that I foresee are maintaining my health and advancing my study of Ixil.

I will inform you about my progress in following letters and continue to provide updates on the situation of the genocide cases, while I continue to relate experiences in community and attempt to explain more of the lives and history of indigenous people in Guatemala.

Also, just a reminder that I am working here as a volunteer and that all of the money that it takes to support me has to be fundraised by myself or the CAMINOS Program of the Denver Peace and Justice Committee, who are sponsoring my stay. I would be delighted and grateful to receive any tax-deductible donations that you can afford throughout the year.

Here is the address:

Denver Justice and Peace Committee
901 W. 14th Avenue, Suite 7
Denver, CO 80204

Tax deductible checks can be made to: DJPC Education Fund

Best wishes,

Brad Lawton