



CAMINOS

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

CAMINOS' ninth human rights accompanier, Heidi Gross, writes her second letter from the highland community of Ilom.

Dear Friends and Family,

This finds my partner Cat and I adjusting (with much difficulty) to the dramatic increase of fleas, cockroaches, and scorpions in our beds and clothing as the heat of summer settles in. But the weather is gorgeous and our health has been relatively stable. So, I feel it is safe to say we are adjusting to the rhythm of life here as best a foreigner could.

The hot weather gave us a great opportunity to visit a nearby waterfall with some of the community members who suggested the outing after lunch one day, as we sat sweating in the heavy and wet afternoon heat. How could we refuse the offer?

The dirt path to the waterfall wound alongside a cold, rippling creek that cuts through a dense forest of *pacaya* and *zapote* trees and other plants with names unknown to me and leaves bigger than our bodies. The sun's strong rays were weakened by the lush overgrowth and only broke the forest's cover in faint streams. On our way, the two girls we were with stopped sporadically to wrap their full length *cortes* (skirts) around their knees and scale to the top of *pacaya* trees, breaking off and dropping the *pacaya* as the thin, stalk-like trees swayed back and forth toward the ground.

Pacaya can be described as a vegetable that comes in a hard shell, similar to the outer appearance of an ear of corn. The inside is cream colored with squid-like tentacles, bitter to taste when eaten raw. *Pacaya* is usually steamed, roasted or fried with egg and eaten with tortillas. We collected as many as we could reach to roast later in the day.

Finally, our trail broke open into a rushing river, headed by an incredible six-story waterfall. To our right, bats flew into a cave hidden in the overhanging rock that showered water down on us. We paused to bathe in a natural spring alongside the river and then settled in the shade of a Santa María plant (used by indigenous groups as a calming bath ingredient for pregnant women). The girls started a fire on a boulder near the river and placed the *pacaya* directly into the flames to roast. For a fleeting moment as we sat in the cool, shady mist watching the girls cook that afternoon, the gravity of suffering this community has endured seemed to be overshadowed by the pleasure of each other's company.

More History of the Massacre



Genuine smile - From the DJPC archives

The grim reality is that the community of Ilom is marked by the past in countless ways. Upon entering the community, the new linear arrangement of houses (close to the road for easy military access), the nearby memorial, and the cemetery where the exhumed remains of family members are buried, remind us that the present is forever haunted by the past and therefore forgetting the loss is impossible.

During the war, the Guatemalan military considered the entire Ixil region to be the base of food, refuge, and seclusion for the guerilla movement. The military subsequently labeled the whole population as subversive. Under this proposition, the military created "Operation Ixil," which implied

three courses of action: elimination, annihilation, and extermination.

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On March 23rd, 1982, members of the military arrived in the community at four o'clock in the morning with the aforementioned goal in mind. They entered each house, woke the inhabitants and forced them into the central plaza, separating the men, women and children. Three men were chosen from the group to act as "indicators," by pointing out the community members supposedly involved in the guerilla army. Men were brought in pairs to the "indicators" and if positively identified, were executed immediately with their wives, children, and townspeople as witnesses. The massacre ended at two o'clock in the afternoon, after the military had taken the lives of 96 people. Surviving men were instructed to bury the dead in four communal graves while the women were forced to prepare lunch for the military. Before retreating, the Guatemalan armed forces burned all of the homes along with their contents and robbed the people of their livestock. Some of the survivors fled to the mountains while the majority sought refuge at a nearby coffee plantation.

After Affects of Past on Present

The families of massacre victims from 22 of the affected indigenous communities have joined together and channeled their pain into a search for justice. The first step in seeking punitive action was forming the Justice and Reconciliation Association (AJR), a body comprised of the families of massacre victims. The AJR filed the denunciation in the *Ministerio Público*, an office similar to the Public Prosecutor in the United States. Currently, the AJR is working closely with the Center for Human Rights Legal Action (CALDH) to convict former dictators Lucas Garcia (1978-1982) and Rios Montt (1982-1983) and six members of their high command who planned the systematic attempt to significantly diminish or eliminate Guatemala's indigenous populations. Presently, the charges of genocide remain in the investigative stage where they have been for nearly five years. In this stage, prosecutors are merely gathering evidence



Mayan priest Don Nicolás © Jonathan Moller

and information. The actual trials have yet to take place. Many argue that the present investigative stage is moving forward at a frustratingly slow rate, a pace set by the Guatemalan government to crush the victims' motivation.

The next option for the defense would be to move the trials to the Inter-American Court on Human Rights in Costa Rica, an option available only after all domestic remedies of justice have been exhausted. While pursuing the case in the Inter-American Court is a method of pressuring the state to progress more rapidly in the national courts in order to avoid undesired censure from the international community, no charges can be brought against individuals such as Lucas Garcia or Rios Montt. If found guilty, the Guatemalan government would face only fines.

*If you are interested in becoming a human rights accompanier in Guatemala, please contact the **Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA)** at:*

*(202) 265-8713; nisguagap@igc.org;
www.nisgua.org;
1380 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Washington DC 20009*

Continued Repression/Oppression in Present Day: Tratado de Libre Comercio or CAFTA

Sown to be eaten, it is the sacred sustenance of the men who were made of maize. Sown to make money, it means famine for the men who were made of maize.

- "Men of Maize" by Miguel Angel Asturias

Another significant current event for Guatemalans is the impending *Tratado de Libre Comercio* (TLC) or Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). As most of you are probably aware, CAFTA is a U.S. proposed agreement that promotes trade liberalization between the United States and five Central American countries: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica, along with the Dominican Republic. The agreement is expected to be voted on by the U.S. Congress sometime this summer.

In Guatemala, indigenous groups stand to be gravely affected by CAFTA. Under CAFTA's proposition, U.S. subsidized agriculture will inundate Guatemala while small, local businesses and farms, particularly those of *campesinos* (peasants), face large risk of failure, lending to increased poverty and destitution.

Agricultural sectors, a major source of employment in Guatemala, would be devastated by the influx of U.S. subsidized produce entering the country

in mass quantities and priced too low for independent businesses to compete. The result would be a net loss of jobs, especially among white corn producers. The negative impact of such trade policies on farmers and the working poor has been proven in the past. As we have seen previously in Mexico (under NAFTA's influence), opening markets to U.S. government subsidized foods drives workers off their land toward urban slums and sweatshops (where under CAFTA their labor rights would be severely reduced). Essentially, the Guatemalan government's philosophy behind CAFTA is that food should be produced for international export rather than supporting domestic needs, such as providing food security.

In an attempt to comply with market demands indigenous groups would shift from centuries old, culturally rooted practices to grow new and different produce for consumption abroad, simply for their own survival. As Rigoberta Menchú explains, "Corn is the center of everything. It's our culture," and in leaving behind corn cultivation for another type of produce, the center of their cultural and spiritual being would be lost.

Additionally, the trade deal offered today poses enormous environmental risks for rural Guatemala, further placing the nucleus of indigenous culture in jeopardy. Carl Pope, executive director of the Sierra Club explains that under current standards:

"CAFTA would not only give foreign investors greater rights under U.S. law to challenge community and environmental safeguards; it also could force governments to weaken environmental standards covering a wide range of services. Under the agreement's provisions, governments could be barred from setting limits on mining and logging activities in ecologically sensitive



Transportation by boat © Jonathan Moller

areas, and from requiring agribusinesses to use pesticides safely."

The public should be aware that CAFTA will be considered under Trade Promotion Authority or "Fast Track" in Congress, meaning officials will have 90 days to reach an agreement on the proposal and no amendments or improvements may be made to the text. As my brief letter can only touch on a few of the dangers of CAFTA, I encourage people to visit either the Global Exchange website (www.globalexchange.org), the Citizens Trade Campaign website (www.citizenstrade.org), and the Denver Justice & Peace Committee website (www.denjustpeace.org) for more detailed information. I also urge people to contact their congressmen and women to object to CAFTA.

Protests in the Capital

I was fortunate to be present in Guatemala City during the first two weeks of March as thousands of indigenous, labor, farmer, and human rights activists peacefully protested this destructive trade deal in front of Congress. Many Guatemalans are highly aware that CAFTA will only increase their struggle against poverty and inequality. They demanded alternatives that would lead to just and sustainable development for all of Guatemala. Unfortunately, the protesters were met with violent and forceful resistance from State security forces, resulting in several serious injuries and the death of an indigenous protester in Huehuetenango. In spite of popular opposition, the deal has already been ratified in the Guatemalan Congress.

Today, although the protests are largely over, anti-CAFTA graffiti paints the walls of nearly every building in the Centre, marking the atmosphere with silent tension and anxiety. More seem to appear each time I go downtown, reminding me of a country whose conscience writes on the walls at night. The public's voice, stifled and then ignored, rises up at night to remind us in the morning of the blanket of impunity covering the country.

Present Day Perseverance

When I first began working here, I found it difficult to understand how people found the strength to persevere after experiencing so many traumas in the past, only to be met with continued oppression in present day. But this past month, as we settled more into life here, visited the waterfall, sat and watched children play, and made connections with the community members, I feel I have begun to realize the answer as much as an outsider could.

It is their culture, kept in secret so no one can steal the core of their being. It is their religion, practiced fervently, that creates a continual source of hope. And finally, it is their deep connection to the present that allows them to extract the happiness key to their survival. Watching their struggle, I have learned that in sitting in the present, fully aware of the small but pure forms of life unfolding before us, we are able to experience joy, even in the midst of anguish. And in that joy, the strength to resist and persevere is found.

I recently read this poem and I feel it pertains well to Guatemala's situation:

*Rise and demand; you are a burning flame.
You are sure to conquer there where the final horizon
Becomes a drop of blood, a drop of life,
Where you will carry the universe on your shoulders,
Where the universe will bear your hope.*

- "Barefoot Meditations" by Miguel Angel Asturias

Thank you again for your continued support of my work here, through your interest, donations, and prayers. I hope you are well and I would love to hear from you. I have email access about once a month and can be reached at heidigross_2000@yahoo.com.

Best Regards,
Heidi

**TELL CONGRESS NO to US MILITARY AID
TO GUATEMALA!!!**

The House and Senate Foreign Operations sub-committees are discussing whether to lift the ban on U.S. military aid to Guatemala.

Guatemala has NOT yet made the substantive reforms necessary to justify a removal of the ban on U.S. military aid in the form of international military training (IMET) and foreign military financing (FMF).

The Guatemalan military has yet to be held accountable for its past abuses, and continues to commit abuses against the Guatemalan people. Resuming assistance now would reward the military for continued human rights violations.

**Call Members of the Foreign Operations
Sub-Committees and let them know
that the IMET/FMF ban
should NOT be removed!**

You can find contact information for the Congress people on the Senate and House Foreign Operations Sub-Committees by calling the Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121.

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