

## **CAMINOS Update- March 2004**

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*By Brad Lawton*

Ilom, Guatemala

Dear Friends and Family,

Some of you may have grown up in a small town with a sports rivalry. If not, at least you have all heard a story of two small towns, one usually slightly more moneyed and uppity or slightly larger and more urban as opposed to the rural “hometown” team whose players came from harder circumstances which meant less well paid coaches and shiny equipment. Sometimes the players of one team would go as far as vandalizing the other teams fields and burning effigies of the rival players. Sometimes there was a story behind the great rivalry started, but in other cases it just seemed as if the two teams had been battling since time immemorial.

In the isolated mountain towns of Guatemala, there is nearly only one sport that is played, that is soccer, and it is taken seriously. After a ten-plus year hiatus, I have thrown myself into the game again at the age of twenty-six. I enrolled to play on a local Ilom (E-LOAM) team as an attempt to be more widely accepted in the community through proving myself on the field. The effort proved informative and somewhat fruitful in terms of making friendships even if it did leave my not-so-young body feeling like a battered, aching mass of jelly and my pride and memories of myself as a competent soccer player in ruins. The positive side of this exercise in self punishment was the new perspective that it offered me of the community of Ilom and its relationship with its neighbors.

On February 29th I played my first game with the team at the Finca Santa Delfina. As we walked away from our hometown, Ilom, passed down through to valley, climbed up through to morning mist to the Finca, it pained me to hear the first defeatist comments from my team. They told me, “here you just want to hit the ball hard, Marcos. Don’t hold onto it, shoot when it comes to you, because these guys are fast.” Then, upon arriving at the field I heard complaints of, “Ah, los mismos de siempre. puchica vos!” “Oh, the same ones as always. damnit man!”



*Brad Lawton with his genocide case partner Meredith Kruse in Ilom.*

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The officials warnings before the game sounded more like those that would pertain to a boxing match, “All right, just keep it clean guys. And no hard feelings afterward. I want you to leave all that here on the field.” The game started and our left halfback scored with a bullet punt from behind the eighteen yard line. I said “buen tiro” or “good shot” and held out a hand. He grunted something and the game went on.

By the time it all ended we had lost six to one. I had not help much. I specifically remembered flying through to air in search of one head ball and missing it clean but managing to land with another player’s head in my stomach before falling with a thud to the hard packed clay and the sound of laughing spectators. We walked off without shaking to other team’s hands and everyone was pretty quiet during the hour walk back to town. It may be that the other team was simply composed of better players or that they had trained longer together, but I knew that there were far stronger psychological and emotional factors at work that had nothing to do with soccer and went back decades.

## **The History**

Weeks earlier, on February 12th a team of five forensic anthropologists had arrived in Ilom together with the remains of nine children that they had exhumed from the cemetery seven months earlier. The children were nine of some one hundred and fifty children who died after the military entered the village with civilian patrollers on March 23, 1982 and massacred nearly one hundred adult men suspected of being guerrillas, burned every house to the ground, shot or stole every pig, horse, or cow found and told the remaining villagers to vacate their homes under threat of death. The large bulk of the population grabbed their relatives and fled across the valley before collapsing at the Finca Santa Delfina.

There they were told, “if you want to eat you must work”. Women had to collect fire wood, work for families of civil patrol leaders and soldiers, as well as cook for themselves and attempt to care for sick and starving children. Men were forced into the civil patrols to work alongside those who had burned their village, murdered their relatives, and stolen the little that they possessed. They had to work the finca’s land when they could find time in between long, forced patrolling marches without food. They and their families were left just enough food to survive, or in many cases not enough. The young children were the most vulnerable and would die, sometimes three or four a day according to survivors. The military would not let parents return to Ilo to bury their loved ones. Workers from the finca would carry the children’s bodies back to the village and bury them under military supervision. All of this time the people of Ilo were not given housing. They were forced to sleep under cardboard and plastic sheets under torrential rainfall and freezing mountain nights. They suffered this persecution for over a year on the soccer field at Santa Delfina.

When the forensic anthropologists arrived on the morning of the 12th they were accompanied by lawyers from the Center for Human Rights Legal Action and a handful of other international human rights monitors, apart from Meredith and I. We filed into the Monte Bascon evangelical church along with the families and extended families of the children whose remains had been returned. Thanks was given to CALDH and the anthropologists by community leaders and then the anthropologists presented their findings. They found that the children had died from starvation and/or other severe environmental stresses, which supported the stories told by their mothers and families. At this point, community members shared their memories and sentiments about this most painful period of their personal histories. One handsome and intelligent young father, Fernando, usually confident and solid, broke into tears and was unable to continue as he described the army murders, nights of trying to calm his younger brother’s fears, and the military persecution and occupation that caused the death of his infant sister and so many others. It was momentarily shocking to see this side of Fernando under the strong, stoic, or often jovial personality that we had always known. Fernando, beside being a farmer and father is also a very avid soccer player and one of the leaders of my team. I admired this small man’s speed, agility, and power on the field, but it was not surprising to me that he, the most macho, and all of the team members accepted defeat even before beginning the game at Santa Delfina, for it was there that they were denied the most basic of their rights. Worse yet, it was the people’s own Guatemalan Military that failed to recognize their humanity and terrorized them, with the financial and advisory backing of the United States Government. The conditions to which the people that we work with in Ilo were subjected would undoubtedly have killed all of us who live such materially comfortable lives.

## **Broader Perspective**

We need to recall as well, that the abuses that I very briefly and incompletely described were committed in over six hundred communities and resulted in the violent deaths of tens of thousands of indigenous Guatemalans in 1981 and 1982 along, during the reigns Rios Montt and Lucas Garcia, the military dictators charged in the case of genocide for which we accompany

witnesses.

The genocide cases have not moved forward significantly since the writing of my last letter. The Lucas Case remains in the Nebaj court and CALDH is continuing the appeals process in the Constitutional Court to have the case returned to the capital, as it is absolutely necessary that a genocide case against a former head of state be tried where the acts of genocide were planned. This is true because the crimes of Rios Montt and Lucas Garcia were the intellectual authoring of policy of massacres and the acts were carried out in nearly all departments of the country by the Guatemalan military and paramilitary patrols.

## **The Backdrop**

In order to put the challenges facing the lawyers at CALDH in perspective, I should mention that the countries it needs to be mentioned that the country's elite groups are involved in a power struggle that has brought out the massive corruption scandals of the past administration and left little possibility for human rights or other popular struggles to advance. In fact, even the former head of the Ministerio

Publico, Carlos De Leon, an office that might be compared to the Attorney General in the United States, faces criminal charges. The Ministerio Publico is the government prosecutors office that is officially responsible for carrying the genocide cases forward, but because the public prosecutors are either corrupt or incompetent,

CALDH is the driving force behind the cases. That said, the change of administrations and some change in the Ministerio Publico could provide some new opportunity for the cases. The new government of the big business conservative Oscar Berger has taken power in Guatemala. That is to say, Berger's administration has taken office and is consolidating control of the nation to whatever extent is possible after the outgoing corrupt conservative, Alfonso Portillo and officials of his administration stole billions of quetzals (local currency) and fled the country leaving the government without funds to operate.

In my next letter, I will include more discussion of national level politics, but, for now I hope to have given you all some small glimpse into the place that I am working. I hope that my message finds you all well and enjoying life. Lastly, I invite any feedback or questions and enjoy hearing from you all while I am far from home.

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