

CAMINOS



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

CAMINOS' ninth human rights accompanier, Heidi Gross, writes her first letter from the highland community of Ilom where she will live for six months.

Dear Friends and Family,

I hope this letter finds you doing well. I have to admit, my first two months in Guatemala have proven to be much more difficult than I anticipated. Adjusting to my position here and persistent health problems have caused me to reflect on the purpose and efficacy of my presence in Ilom and Xix, the two communities where my partner Cat and I work.

I am spending six months in rural Guatemala as a human rights observer and an advocate for witnesses to massacres committed during Guatemala's civil war by former dictators Lucas García (1978-1982), Ríos Montt (1982-1983) and their high command. Currently, some witnesses in select communities, including Ilom and Xix, are struggling to achieve justice for these genocidal campaigns in the national court system. My role as an accompanier is to observe and record the human rights situation in the communities involved in the genocide cases. Accompaniment also provides an international presence and symbolic support for witnesses involved in the cases, and is a source of pressure on the Guatemalan government and military to protect the human rights of its citizens.

For me personally, the role of accompaniment becomes less abstract as these new acquaintances begin to take root into real relationships through the sharing of daily life and histories. Simply put, being here in support of this great struggle allows me to share in the celebration of human life and reflect on the purpose of my own life.

Brief Political Background

As many of you are aware, the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996 marked the end of a brutal civil war in Guatemala. However, problems for indigenous Guatemalans began before the actual start of the war, with the 1954 CIA-sponsored coup that expelled the reformist president Jacobo Arbenz. The coup reinstated the previous government of Arévalo to power and eliminated nationalist programs such as agrarian reform, which intended to redistribute land that had been previously absorbed by large plantation owners and international corporations to the peasant population. Without the support of these crucial social programs, the Guatemalan military and U.S. Alliance for Progress expanded their holdings, and international corporations such as the United Fruit Company extended their export capacity. As a result, many

indigenous communities suffered displacement and local indigenous and peasant economies struggled or failed, while large-scale multinational corporations increased agricultural export. Without economic stability, many indigenous community members were forced to join the labor camps of agro-export plantations. This was the beginning of low-paid, migrant labor that would help support Guatemala's and other countries' economic growth spurts.

With an export-based economy, the domestic market was destabilized. Profits gained from the world market were funneled back into the military and elitist ruling class, which ignored popular interests. Guatemalan indigenous people, representing 55% of the population, became a majority without a voice and without representation.

As the ruling class increased its strength by eliminating left-wing, progressive politics in Guatemala



Beautiful Countryside in Ilom

through military aid from the United States, indigenous groups responded by grassroots organizing, such as creating cooperatives and community social programs and registering their land. This allowed indigenous groups to participate in market-oriented agriculture and greatly alarmed the larger agro-businesses who were also deeply intertwined in the ruling coalition. Large agricultural exporters had previously relied on easy access to land and a cheap, abundant labor force. They viewed this emergence of stability within the indigenous community as a threat to their rural hegemony. The state responded with brutal violence in the form of kidnapping, torturing, and murdering leaders of the indigenous movements and cooperatives, labeling them as communist subversives.

During the late 1970's, Guatemala's indigenous people experienced further trauma, causing their economic situation to become increasingly dire. The world economic crisis of the late 1970's marked the end of 30 years of export-led growth for Guatemala. Seasonal labor contracted while inflation pushed up the prices of basic necessities and caused the indigenous poor to become even poorer. The incident in the small town of Panzós has been said to have been the breaking point. Kekchi Indians there had been losing land to large cattle ranchers and invited authorities to attend a meeting in May of 1978 to discuss options and ask for help. The Guatemalan military reacted by opening fire and murdering over 100 attendees in what would be considered the first of 626 documented massacres of unarmed civilians during the war, most taking place between the years of 1981-1983. Estimated death tolls range from 200,000 to 400,000 people, while an approximated 400 villages were completely annihilated. Exploited, locked out of politics, and facing increasingly violent repression, many indigenous people joined the guerilla movement as a final alternative.

Community members in Ilom



Daily Life in Community and Residual Effects of the Past
When I first arrived I was struck by the natural beauty and quiet calm surrounding the Ixil region. Our designated community, Ilom, is settled low amongst breathtaking green mountains. The sun shines hot and clear in the early

morning, waking the community and verdant plant life in its warmth. By mid-afternoon, the sun's intensity is abruptly replaced by dense cloud cover that becomes a lingering, ghostlike fog by nightfall, heavy and wet to inhale.

The community's homes are built along footpaths that wind along the mountainside, overlooking the corn and coffee fields. Horses and cattle graze out front, while dogs, pigs, chickens, ducks, and turkeys wander freely around the houses. Inside, light leaks through the spaces in the plank walls and corrugated steel roofs, patched with sheets of plastic to help keep the dirt floors from turning into mud during the rainy season. Most houses are one room, with space given for a small cooking fire and plank beds. Corn hangs to dry from the rafters with the husks blackening from smoke emitted by the fire. Early in the morning, women can be seen walking to the *molino* (mill) to grind their daily corn, while men leading pack mules head off to the fields. On the surface, life here seems quiet and stripped of the superfluous.

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

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www.nisgua.org;*

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History of the massacres

One morning in Xix, as the community seemed to have disappeared into their daily work, I wandered off to explore the paths through the town. I noticed a small, newly built building. It appeared to be public, so I entered. Its stark whitewashed walls and earthen pots stuffed full with wilting calla lilies placed in front of a memorial were a sharp reminder of the indigenous people's painful history of repression, buried deeply under their every day lives. The memorial had been erected on the anniversary of the massacre in their community with an inaugural ceremony a mere two weeks earlier. I remember feeling a tinge of hurt at not having been notified of it by any of the witnesses with whom I work. The small, golden plaque placed on the back wall read:

Remembering the Past

In memory of the more than 113 people massacred assassinated or disappeared. For those who died of hunger, thirst, and for all those who suffer from residual trauma resulting from the armed conflict.

On the afternoon of February 16, 1982, soldiers visited the town of Xix with the excuse of "surveying the land and people's work." After questioning one family as they were planting corn, they summoned everyone into the house. Children ran in excitedly, expecting gifts. The soldiers locked the entire family into the house and set it on fire. Everyone burned alive. The same day, four other families

were massacred by the Guatemalan military in this manner. One witness recounts the day:

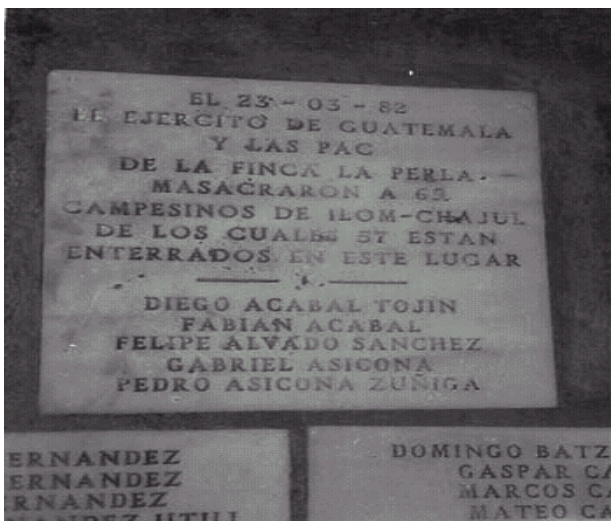
When I saw the smoke, I ran to see what was happening. When I arrived, it smelled like burned meat. I realized that it was people that were burned. It was difficult to identify them, because they were completely burned black... We opened a small hole and collected the dead, placed them in and quickly buried them, because we were scared.

Nearly all of the inhabitants of Xix left the following day for the mountains of Santa Clara, abandoning their houses, animals and crops. The few families who refused to leave were massacred days later. During that time, people struggled without clothing and subsisted on only one food source, a hearty root called *malanga*. While death from sickness, cold and hunger was common, members of the military also visited regularly to destroy *malanga* crops and kill more people. Some residents of Xix remained in Santa Clara for the next 15 years before returning to their community.

Later that day, as I returned to the house where we stay, the witness met me with a smile and a pamphlet from the inaugural ceremony describing the massacres. It was as if he had known I had visited the memorial. (Nothing seems to go unnoticed in the community). A pang of guilt over my previous irritation served as a reminder to me—trust here is earned, not granted. Rightfully so. With such a new relationship, it was arrogant of me to expect people's confidence in sharing their most painful moments.

Semana Santa

The week before Easter in Guatemala, referred to as *Semana Santa*, is celebrated within indigenous communities as a time to rest and socialize. The Thursday before Easter seems to be the most celebrated day, more so than even Easter Sunday, as it is the first day of much needed rest. My partner and I were sitting with one of the



Monument to massacre victims in Ilo

families on this day, enjoying a cup of *atole*, a drink made with corn and cacao, when the husband shared with us some of their traditions. He explained that the *atole* is prepared by a different family each day of the week and shared among other families and friends. In the same manner, children bring bread to friends' and families' houses each day. It's the tradition of coexistence that appears to be at the root of the indigenous way of life.

He mentioned that there would be a *baile* or dance in the center of town later that day that would continue through Sunday. However, most people don't participate in the dancing or even the sharing of *atole* and bread any more, he added. In the past, before the massacres, the dancers would carry on all through the streets of the town with a large procession of people following. The streets were swept and decorated with flowers and candles. A statue of the Virgin Mary was always presented. Everyone attended and celebrated, proud of their culture. The massacres instilled a fear in the community. In turn, they became accustomed to not practicing and even renouncing their culture in order to protect their lives. His family, he added, would not partake in the dancing this year. Cat and I decided to go anyway.

We watched, selecting a vantage point out of the way. The dancers, a small group of teenage boys, moved together in no discernable pattern to the beat of a *marimba* (traditional instrument). *Campesinos* (peasants) and women in *traje* (traditional dress) circumscribed with soldiers carrying guns. All wore masks. A modest gathering of spectators formed a circle around the dancers. Just then, two visibly drunk young men broke through the circle and joined the participants, flailing their arms and pushing them off balance in their attempt to dance. It was disturbing and uncomfortable, but no one removed them from the dancing. It simply continued—a perfect representation of past and present joined together and celebrating in the anguish and glory of reality.

So What Am I Really Doing Here?

On paper, the purpose of accompaniment is fairly clear—observe, record and promote protection of human rights. However, I am having trouble (and imagine I always will) understanding its boundaries and applications when applied to real life. The idea is to take nothing and give nothing but your presence, as a form of non-violent support against human rights abuses. When the incredible moments arise during which a witness shares with you his or her experiences, I'm overwhelmed with feelings of wanting to do more, wanting to actualize "concrete change". I need constant reminding that *my* ideas of helping actually interfere and intrude.

When my partner and I go to a family's house to visit, we are unfailingly offered a small wooden chair to sit on and usually a cup of coffee or *mosh*, a drink made from

ground oatmeal. Conversation can be difficult, as most of the women speak only their indigenous Ixil language and the men, who speak more Spanish, have usually gone to work in the fields for the day. It is taken me all of my first two months to begin to learn to sit through the silence and rest more calmly in the understanding that my gestures and presence mean more than my words.

Through our presence we show support. Only when I can let go of my culturally constructed way of operating and simply be in solidarity, can hope be restored. It is in that hope that all life is sustained and regenerated.

A good friend of mine gave me this quote as a gift before leaving. I feel it is appropriate:

What is our responsibility in the creation of a more just and peaceful world? Our response might be summed up by the word "accompaniment". To deviate from other pathways for a while (and then forever), to walk with those on the margins, to be with them, to let go. Through this encounter with God at the margins, We as individuals and societies experience an ongoing, profound, spirit-led conversion of heart, soul and mind. Slowly our centers of gravity move outside of ourselves. And we find ourselves suddenly dancing with friends in unknown places and with great joy.

-Marie Dennis, St Francis and the Foolishness of God

Thank you again for all of your donations, moral support and interest in my work here. I will keep in contact as the months continue! Sincerely, Heidi

UPDATE ON THE CURRENT HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN GUATEMALA

The human rights situation in Guatemala has steadily deteriorated. Human rights violations have been increasing for the past two years, and in 2004 ten percent more human rights abuses were reported than in 2003. In the first three months of 2005 numerous human rights violations occurred. Amnesty International documented that in the first 52 days of the year, 26 human rights activists were threatened or attacked.

The violence was not reserved for social activists and human rights workers. Women were brutally murdered, often by strangers not interested in robbery and with no apparent motive but to foment terror. The tortured, raped, mutilated bodies of the women were in many cases left where they were sure to be viewed by passersby. From January through March, an average of two women a day were murdered.

The social climate has grown increasingly tense, as those pressing for change lose faith in President Oscar Berger's willingness to negotiate solutions. The criminalization of social protest under the Berger government has led to the imprisonment of evicted campesinos and, more recently, to arrest warrants for leaders of demonstrations.

For the complete human rights report see the GHRC website at the address below:

[http://www.ghrc-usa.org/
Publications/2005FirstQuarter.htm](http://www.ghrc-usa.org/Publications/2005FirstQuarter.htm)

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