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Four West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

## CE-10 THE AMERICAS

*Chenoa Egawa is a Fellow of the Institute studying the marketing of Native American products, crafts and produce in MesoAmerica.*

# Truth — and Reconciliation?

GUATEMALA CITY, Guatemala

March, 1999

By Chenoa Egawa

Several days prior to the release of the Commission for Historical Clarity's (CEH) report "Guatemala, Memory of Silence – Tz'Inil Na'Tab'Al," the Commission delivered a statement in *elPeriodico* announcing that their findings would finally be made public on February 25, 1999.<sup>1</sup> The CEH had been formed on June 23, 1994 under the Oslo Accord signed by the Guatemalan Government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG, *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca*).<sup>2</sup> Its mission was to document human-rights violations that occurred during the country's 34 years of internal armed conflict.<sup>3</sup> On July 31, 1997 the CEH began its work collecting testimonies from victims and witnesses of the violence. Upon completion of its mission 20 months later, it had compiled direct testimonies from approximately 42,000 victims, a number considered to be only a sample of total violations.

"...The Commission wants to express its highest recognition to all Guatemalan People, to the victims of past violence, to their families, to the witnesses, to so many people who by their own personal initiative, and for the purpose of contributing to national reconciliation through clarifying (Guatemala's) history, have participated and confided in the CEH. Without them, without their assistance, support and confidence, our delicate work would have been difficult to accomplish in its totality. Your permanent support has motivated and inspired us."<sup>4</sup>

The release of "Guatemala, Memory of Silence" on February 25, 1999,

<sup>1</sup> *elPeriodico* Guatemala, February 21, 1999, page 9.

<sup>2</sup> The CEH began its work on July 31, 1997 and finished February 25, 1999. Three commissioners, Christian Tomuschat, Otilia Lux de Coti, and Alfredo Balsells guided the work of the CEH. 272 professionals were contracted — 129 Guatemalan and the remainder foreigners representing 32 different nationalities. The majority of the 3,400-page final document consists of direct testimonies of the victims, but there were also key testimonies given by ex-Chiefs of State, ex-Ministers, and ex-Commanders of the Guerrillas. Four regional headquarters were set up in Guatemala City, Huehuetenango, Coban and Santa Cruz del Quiche. Ten additional offices were set up in other regions throughout the country. The CEH's work in gathering testimonies was supported by 12 translators of different Mayan languages. Five exhumations of clandestine graves were also conducted during the CEH's work, which supplied important evidence about massacres that occurred during the war. Translated from *elPeriodico* Guatemala, February 23, 1999, page 4, "Según la CEH, la guerra rompió el principio de convivencia," by Edgar Gutierrez and Carlos Menocal.

<sup>3</sup> The CEH concluded that there were 34 years and 10 months of armed conflict beginning in February 1962 and ending on December 29, 1996 when the Government and *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca*, URNG, signed the Peace Accords. Translated from *Prensa Libre*, February 25, 1999, page 3, "Senalán 626 massacres," by Julieta Sandoval and Adolfo Argueta.

<sup>4</sup> Translated from article cited under footnote #1.

quite coincidentally, corresponded with the start of the year 5,115 in the Mayan agricultural calendar. On this day, “*el kej* (deer) — the *nahual* (spirit) — which governed the previous year, gave way to the new *nahual*, *Oxlajuj E*. *Oxlajuj E*, which means “thirteen road” in the K’iche’ language, will govern in the next 19 months (18 months of 20 days each, and one month of five days). Both words are significant. *Thirteen* is the highest number in the sacred count and *road* signifies destiny. Many Mayan people have made interpretations of what this New Year symbolizes. According to the Academy of Mayan Languages, it will be a year of important decisions and great opportunities.<sup>5</sup>

\* \* \*

On the evening of February 24, 1999, an all-night ceremony was conducted at the *Plaza de la Constitución* in Guatemala City. Mayan priests, in conjunction with representatives from several Mayan organizations brought together by The National Coordinator of Widows of Guatemala (*la Coordinadora Nacional de Viudas de Guatemala*, CONAVIGUA) welcomed in the Mayan New Year and awaited the release of the CEH report to be presented the following morning.

To begin the ceremony, Mayan priests placed four large candles on the ground, one in each of the four cardinal directions: red to the east, black to the west, white to the north and yellow to the south. From there, prayers of thanks began while the spirit of the New Year, *Oxlajuj E*, was drawn in white sugar in the center of the four candles. Next, *pom* (incense of copal tree resins) was placed over the drawing. Upon the *pom*, white candles were laid down in a circle with the wicks facing towards the center. Prayers continued as the candles were lit and the fire — symbol of truth and purification — burned on.<sup>6</sup>

\* \* \*

The following morning, February 25, 1999, the CEH presented its report to a packed house at the national theater in downtown Guatemala City. Before entering the theater, I walked along rows and rows of Mayan men

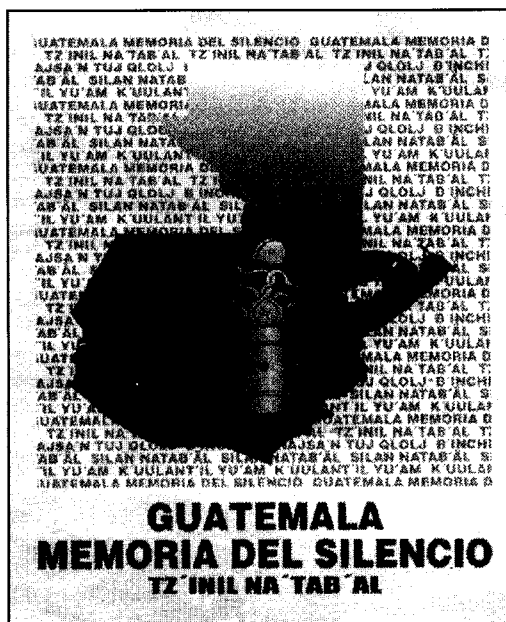
and women, several of whom held up paintings by Mayan artists that depicted the violence and atrocities committed against tens of thousands of people, the majority of whom were Mayan, during the internal armed conflict. Others held up bulletin boards containing past news articles on the war, the “disappeared” and the lack of human rights. Among the people, there were women dressed in *guipiles*, the traditional woven blouse/poncho in a brilliant variety of designs and colors, each representing their community of origin. Although I could not place many of them, I did recognize those from Nebaj, a K’iche’ community in the Quiche Region known as the Ixchil Triangle, the region that suffered the greatest number of deaths, disappearances and massacres during the violence.

To enter the theater every person had to pass through metal detectors. Approximately 3,000 people were in attendance, at least half of whom appeared to be representatives of international organizations. The other half were Guatemalan, very few of whom were indigenous.

President Alvaro Arzu, accompanied by members and chiefs of the various State Ministries, arrived right before the CEH began their presentation. The President and his entourage occupied the entire front row. Right in the middle of the row of men in suits sat 1992 Nobel Peace Prize Winner, Rigoberta Menchu.

President Arzu sat quietly throughout the two-hour presentation. One Government representative, one URNG representative and the three CEH Commissioners each took turns

at the podium. Otilia Lux de Coti, a Mayan woman and CEH Commissioner, gave a particularly moving speech. In her voice, her words and her presence, she carried a powerful message filled with strength and emotion. “In the name of the Mayan people, living and dead, we ask forgiveness to the God of all Gods, and to all people of Guatemala, because we were involved in an imposed armed conflict and it was not ours.” She spoke about “the supreme sacrifice of blood offered generously by Mayan men and women to give life to our beloved country ...



The symbol used for the cover of the CEH report. The glyph was taken from the Dresden Codex. (The meaning of the glyph is described in footnote #6).

<sup>5</sup> *elPeriodico Guatemala*, February 25, 1999, page 2, “Hoy inicia el año ‘trece camino’ de los mayas,” by Mirja Valdes.

<sup>6</sup> The illustration used on the cover of the CEH report was taken from the Dresden Codex. As stated in the CEH report, “It is the glyph of truth, formed from two other glyphs. The upper one, *Toj*, represents the *nahual*, par excellence, of the Mayans and signifies the offering, the payment for life, the gift and the penalty. The lower one represents the altar for offerings where *Ajaw* speaks to the *Ajq’ijab* people and the sacred fire that expresses the past, present and future.”



*Mayan men and women stood before the entrance of the national theater on the morning of February 25, 1999, the day the CEH presented their report, "Guatemala, Memory of Silence," to the public. They held up numerous paintings that symbolized the violence suffered by tens of thousands during the violence.*

and we are present here today to build the future and give an inheritance to our sons and daughters — the magnificent legacy of liberty." She talked of the centuries of suffering endured by the Mayan people — extreme poverty, hunger, illiteracy, exclusion and contempt, but "we still lacked knowing organized violence and the shadow of death. ... The Mayan people do not want vengeance," she said, "but yes, we do want to be recognized, to be valued and to be respected." She concluded by saying, "the CEH report is now left in the hands of men and women, Mayas and [Spanish-descended] Ladinos of Guatemala, but above all in the hands of the new generations, so that they will know what happened during 34 years of fratricidal war."<sup>7</sup>

Twice the presenters acknowledged the memory of Archbishop Juan Gerardi, Pastoral Director of the first "truth commission" report to be released on political violence and human rights violations during the war in Guatemala by the Office of Human Rights of the Archbishop of Guatemala. This report was titled "Guatemala, Never Again" — Recuperation of the Historical Memory (*Guate-*

*mala, Nunca Más – Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica, REMHI*). Archbishop Gerardi presented the REMHI report to the Guatemalan public on May 24, 1998 and was murdered in cold blood two days later.<sup>8</sup> He is remembered by many as a hero, "a martyr of truth." At the first mention of the Archbishop, the crowd roared, honoring his memory with a three-minute standing ovation. At other moments, people in the audience shouted aggressively at President Arzu to respond to the implications against the army's role in the violence and to receive a copy of the CEH report. Similar outbursts of unrest from the public occurred at the mention of the involvement of the United States Government and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Christian Tomuschat, a German professor of International Law who was selected by the Secretary General of the United Nations to form the CEH and serve as the Commission's Coordinator, spoke last. "When we, as Commissioners formed the CEH, each one of us, in different ways, and by life's fortune, knew generally what had occurred in Guatemala during the armed confronta-

<sup>7</sup> From notes from Otilia Lux de Coti's speech presented at the national theater on February, 25, 1999 and the *Prensa Libre*, February 26, 1999, pg. 4, "Perdonamos a todos," by Julieta Sandoval.

<sup>8</sup> The murder of Archbishop Gerardi, the subject of much controversy, remained unsolved at the time that this article was written.

tion. But no one of us could have imagined the dimensions of this tragedy, not even the Guatemalan Commissioners who had lived the experience directly.” He brought the presentation to a close by listing a strong, straightforward set of the CEH’s conclusions and recommendations. The following are a few of the Commission’s conclusions<sup>9</sup>:

- The cases investigated by the Commission are but a sample of the reality of the human rights violations and acts of violence that occurred during the armed confrontation. In these cases, we registered more than 42,000 victims; 29,000 were executed or “disappeared.” Combining this data with other studies, we have come to the conclusion that the number of dead and disappeared as a result of this fratricidal confrontation comes to more than 200,000 people.
- The Commission has been able to establish that State forces and allied paramilitary groups were responsible for 93% of documented violations; the insurgent forces were responsible for 3%, and the remaining 4% of cases include other perpetrators, as well as those cases where it was impossible to collect sufficient evidence to establish responsibility.
- It is with profound sadness that the Commission learned of the extreme cruelty with which many of the violations were committed; of the large number of girls and boys who were victims of violent cruelty and murder, and of the special brutality directed against women, especially against Mayan women, who were tortured, raped and murdered.
- This violent scourge that Guatemala suffered for more than three decades cannot be explained simply as a consequence of a confrontation between two armed parties ... We have reached the conclusion that the structure and nature of the economic, cultural and social relationships in Guatemala, as well as racism, the closing of spaces for participation and the refusal by the State to promote substantive reform, were all factors that determined the origin and the outbreak of the armed confrontation... The Commission concluded that the fundamental reasons for the Guatemalan armed confrontation cannot be reduced to the simplistic logic of two armed factions...
- ...foreign governments often became involved in Guatemala’s internal affairs, and in so doing they contributed to the resolve and perseverance of the armed confrontation. The Commission’s investigations demonstrate that until the mid-1980’s the United States Government and U.S. private companies exercised pressure to maintain the country’s archaic and unjust socio-economic structure. In addition, the United States Government, through its constituent structures, including the Central Intelligence Agency,
- lent direct and indirect support to some illegal State operations. At the same time, the Commission has information regarding the support given by the - Cuban Government to the guerrilla organizations, including military training for combatants. The Commission received only fragmentary information, which it could not corroborate concerning the involvement of other foreign governments.
- The National Security Doctrine, that for many years guided the Guatemalan State and National Army’s strategic orientations, is one of the theoretical bases that produced the national tragedy. According to this doctrine, the counterinsurgency strategy explicitly identified the internal enemy not only as members of the insurgent organizations, but rather included in that category all those citizens, organized or not, who could be considered political opponents. The application of this doctrine explains, with earth-shaking clarity, why the overwhelming majority of victims of the armed confrontation were NOT combatants, but rather, civilians: some of whom died for their ideals and others who were killed in totally indiscriminate actions.
- During a large part of the internal armed confrontation, and believing that the end justified everything, the Military and the State security forces blindly pursued the anti-Communist struggle without respect for any legal principles, or the most elemental ethical and religious values and in this way completely lost any semblance of human morals.
- The Mayan population has paid the highest price for the irrational logic of the armed conflict. Particularly during the years of heaviest violence from 1978 to 1983, when in various regions of the country the military identified groups of Mayan people as natural allies of the Guerrillas. This false conviction raised the number of human-rights violations and aggravated the nature of the violations that were perpetrated against the Mayans. This fact is evidenced by the aggressive, racist and extremely cruel nature of the violations that resulted in the massive extermination of defenseless Mayan communities that were identified as being associated with the guerrillas. Among the victims were children, women and the elderly, attacked by methods whose cruelty horrifies the moral conscience of the civilized world.
- Mayan communities were completely exterminated through massacres and the [specifically] denominated “scorched earth” operations planned by State forces that included the destruction of homes, cattle, crops and other elements essential for survival ... The Commission has registered 626<sup>10</sup> massacres whose responsibility is attributed to State forces.<sup>11</sup> The Commission determined that many of the massacres

<sup>9</sup> From Comments of Mr. Christian Tomuschat, Coordinator of the Historical Clarification Commission, at the Formal Presentation of the Commission’s Report, February 25, 1999. Translated from Spanish.

<sup>10</sup>The CEH registered a total of 669 massacres, not 626, as was first published in *Prensa Libre* on February 25, 1999.” Translated from *Prensa Libre*, February 26, 1999, page 3, “Acusación por genocidio,” by Lucy Barrios.

and other human-rights violations committed against these groups responded to an established, higher policy, which was strategically planned and translated into actions that followed a logical and coherent sequence.

- On the basis of thorough investigation, and taking into account the definitions contained in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the Commission concludes with great consternation that within the framework of the counterinsurgency operations carried out between 1981 and 1983, in certain regions of the country agents of the Guatemalan State committed acts of genocide against groups of the Mayan people.
- The country's judicial system, due to its lack of efficacy, whether by provocation or deliberation, did not guarantee compliance with the law. In this way, it tolerated the violence or even facilitated it. Whether by action or omission, the judicial branch played a part in exacerbating social conflicts in different moments of Guatemalan history. Impunity escalated to the point where it seized hold of the State's very structure, and it came to represent not only a means but an end in and of itself. As a means it served to shield the State and allied individuals from any repercussions for their repressive actions. As an end, impunity was the result of the methods used to suppress and eliminate political and social adversaries.
- The Guerrilla groups also committed acts of violence that violated the right to life by means of arbitrary executions directed against the civilian population of defenseless individuals, some of them connected to the confrontation in the cases of military commissioners and members of the Civilian Patrols. The Commission has proved that Guerrilla groups were also responsible for the arbitrary execution of some members of their own organizations.
- Additionally, the Guerrillas perpetrated 32 massacres, mainly between 1981 and 1982.
- Most of the human rights violations documented by the Commission and which were perpetrated by State agents or allied paramilitary groups came about with the knowledge, or by order of the highest military authorities. The Commission considered evidence coming from diverse sources — including statements by former members of the military and stated security services, as well as declassified documents from the United States — demonstrating that Military Intelligence, especially the G-2 and the Presidential General Staff (EMP) were the intellectual authors and the direct organizers of illegal detentions and questioning, torture, forced disappearances and executions.
- The results of our investigations demonstrate that, in general, the excuse that mid-level commanders

acted with a wide margin of autonomy — an excuse used in an attempt to justify what happened as “excesses” and “errors” not ordered by superiors — is unsubstantiated and totally lacking any basis.

- The authors of the Oslo Accord believed that, in spite of the shock that the nation could suffer upon looking in the mirror of its past, it was necessary to know the truth and make it public. They hoped and still do that the truth should lead to reconciliation. Knowing the truth of what happened will make it easier to achieve national reconciliation so that all Guatemalans can live in an authentic democracy. Undoubtedly, the truth benefits everyone: the victims, whose past has been denigrated and manipulated, will be dignified; and those responsible will, through the recognition of their criminal acts, be able to restore their dignity as well, a dignity they denied themselves through their own actions.
- However, no one can today ensure that this immense challenge of reconciliation through truth can be met with success. In order to do so, the historic facts must be recognized and assimilated into each individual consciousness and the collective consciousness. The country's future depends, in great part, on the response of the State and society to the tragedies suffered in flesh and blood by the immense majority of Guatemalan families.

The CEH's recommendations on how this “immense challenge” could be realized followed the conclusions. Among them, the CEH recommended:

- ♦ that a national reparations program be initiated immediately and that it include measures to dignify the memory of the victims, and publicly disseminate the true history of the armed confrontation;
- ♦ that the State undertake an active policy of exhumations of the hundreds of clandestine cemeteries;
- ♦ that the State comply and ensure compliance with the National Reconciliation Law in every respect by pursuing and judging all the war crimes;
- ♦ that the President of the Republic establish a commission under his immediate authority and supervision to examine the conduct of military officials and of all those officials who comprise the State's diverse security forces and bodies that were active during the armed confrontation for the purpose of adopting adequate administrative measures to purge these same bodies;
- ♦ that there be administration of justice and respect for human rights, civic education, the promotion of a culture of mutual respect and the

<sup>11</sup>Of the 669 massacres, the Quiche Region suffered 53% of this total; the department of Huehuetenango suffered 14% of total massacres; Chimaltenango, 11%; Alta Verapaz, 9% and Baja Verapaz, 4%. *Prensa Libre*, Guatemala, February 25, 1999, “Senalán 626 massacres, CEH, *En el informe no se registran todas las violaciones a los Derechos Humanos*,” by Julieta Sandoval y Adolfo Argueta, page 3.

dissemination of the historic truth;

- ▶ that there be profound legislative reforms that define a new function for the military and a new military doctrine, as well as reinforce the civilian character of the National Civilian Police;
- ▶ that the President of the Republic and the ex-Commanders of the URNG respectfully and finally ask for pardon from the society as a whole, and
- ▶ that there be the establishment of a national entity to followup, support, promote and track compliance with the CEH's recommendations.<sup>12</sup>

When the presentation was over, there was another standing ovation. A couple of moments into the ovation, President Arzu stood up and walked toward the stage. Some fell silent and others shouted aggressively at him. His escorts quickly swarmed in around him, moving together *en masse*. Camera strobes flashed as he ascended the short flight of stairs, crossed the stage and walked over to the Commissioners. They rose to meet him. He shook each person's hand, turned and exited the stage, and the building, through a side door. No comment. And no report in hand.

The official public presentation of the CEH report marked the end of the Commission's mandate. With its mission completed in conformity with the Oslo Accord, the CEH disbanded. The three Commissioners, for their own safety, were advised to leave the country for an extended period of time following the release of the report in order to avoid another potential tragedy like that of the murder of Archbishop Gerardi. All three took the advice and left Guatemala.

\* \* \*

They burned our leaves	<i>Quemaron nuestras hojas</i>
They cut our branches	<i>Cortaron nuestras ramas</i>
They cut our fruits	<i>Cortaron nuestros frutos</i>
But never (killed) our roots	<i>Pero jamás nuestras raíces</i> <sup>13</sup>

## Rabinal, Baja Verapaz

The weekend following the release of the CEH report I went to Rabinal in Baja Verapaz Province with two friends, Belén from Spain, and Gé from Portugal, both of whom work for international organizations in humanitarian aid and development issues.

Belén is a devout Catholic and has made many contacts with Catholic *Padres* in Guatemala, most of whom

are her fellow countrymen. In one of our conversations, I told her that I would like to meet some of the *Padres* who had been working and living in Mayan communities. Originally my question pertained to how they, as representatives of the Catholic faith and the Catholic Institution, define their role and their work with Mayan people. Do they respect the people with whom they are working in regard to seeking to understand the culture, the language and the beliefs of those people? More specifically, do they acknowledge and respect Mayan culture, spiritual beliefs and practices, or is it more important for them to seek converts to the Catholic faith? I knew that the answers would vary according to each *Padre's* point of view. I was very curious to hear directly from some of them about their work.

With the CEH report released, I thought it would also be interesting to talk to Catholic *Padres* who had been in Mayan communities during the armed conflict. What was it like during the war in the communities? What was their experience and understanding of this war?

Here in Guatemala I have learned that a plan of action often consists of choosing a starting point and allowing a story to unfold from there. Rarely if ever have I accomplished exactly what I set out to learn by using a pre-planned agenda, so instead I put together a list of questions and ideas that serve to get me out there in the first place. From there *something* is sure to be set in motion. I start from one point and let myself be led by the cast of characters that I meet and the circumstances in which I find myself — just “along for the ride” really — not knowing where the search will lead.

*Patience.* My hopes are that I will be able to write a story; that the experience will be complete enough to share. I travel all over the country in search of answers to my questions. Sometimes I return to my apartment in Guatemala City deeply disappointed with my findings or lack thereof. Other times, I am shocked by the insights I gathered.

This time, the two-day trip to Rabinal proved to be the latter, not because all my questions were answered, but because my eyes and my heart were laid wide open, allowing me to experience a small bit of this country's history, its people and their painful struggles.

Belén's contacts with the *Padres* in the capital paid off and she, Gé and I were on our way to Rabinal, Baja Verapaz to meet *Padre* Roberto, who had been in Rabinal at the Catholic Church for the past six years. The three of us had talked about spending a weekend together for months, but our diverse schedules had not permitted it

<sup>12</sup> Taken from “Comments of Mr. Christian Tomschat, Coordinator of the Historical Clarification Commission, at the Formal Presentation of the Commission's Report. February 25, 1999.” Same footnote as #8.

<sup>13</sup> From joint statement “To the Memory of Our Martyrs” before the delivery of the report of the Commission for Historical Clarity, presented by several Mayan organizations on February 24, 1999.



before. In the car on our way to Rabinal, Gé asked me, "Now what is it you are going to discuss with the *Padre*?" I answered with my list of fairly general questions. I think Belén worried about the way I chose to word them. I believe she thought that they lacked tact and that I might start off by offending the *Padre* and get nowhere. She offered me a bit of advice. "Just tell him that you are interested in the Catholic Church and it's work in Mayan communities," she said. "You don't really need to go into detail. If you ask in very general terms it will open the way for him to explain what he is doing."

"Okay," I agreed, smiling.

The last hour of the four-and-a-half hour drive was along a dirt road that wound up and around the top of a mountain range. At the highest point, we had an expansive view of Rabinal in a remote, isolated valley below, surrounded by mountains on all sides. Knowing that we would arrive soon, I looked into the rearview mirror. "Belén?" I said in a very serious and concerned tone of voice. "Yes?" She said leaning forward from the back seat to hear better over the loud crunching of tires grinding through rock and gravel. "Now how am I supposed to ask the *Padre* about his work again?" We all burst out laughing.

This was my first time in the municipality of Rabinal. The people in the actual town by the same name are a mix of Ladino and Maya Achi. Those who live in the mountainous villages outside of town are almost entirely Achi. I had heard of Rabinal before. Several months earlier, a friend invited me there along with some people who work with traditional Mayan elders. The purpose of their visit was to accompany some of the local Achi people who would be reburying the remains of their dead. During recent exhumations of clandestine graves that resulted from the conflict, some of the local people had recently recovered the remains of their relatives and were finally going to give them a proper burial. I did not go with my friend that time.

Rabinal has also been in the news a lot lately. According to the CEH report, 28 massacres took place in Rabinal in the early 1980s. It was one of the regions that had been declared a guerrilla zone by the army. Their accusation gave them an "official" reason to declare all of the local people automatic enemies of the State under the National Security Doctrine. They were considered Communists or Communist supporters of the guerrillas. As a result the army, together with members of local Civilian Self-Defense Patrols (*Patrulleros de Autodefensa Civil*, PAC) came down hard on their "enemies." The PAC were made up of villagers, mostly Mayan, who were forced by the army to organize into patrol units that would serve as the "eyes and the ears" of the Military regarding guerrilla movements in the region.

One of the five exhumations conducted during the

CEH investigations was the horrifying and well-publicized massacre of Rio Negro, an Achi village in the mountains of Rabinal. According to the newspapers, the army and members of the PAC from the neighboring Achi village of Xococ were responsible. The case of three ex-PAC members from Xococ had been in the papers over the past few months. On November 30, 1998, the three were given the death penalty for involvement in the Rio Negro massacre of March 13, 1982. Their case went to court in February of this year in Coban, Alta Verapaz Province, and on February 25, 1999 their lawyer was able to get the sentence annulled because "the Court detected incongruities in the verdict given by the Tribunal of Coban." In addition, the court magistrates determined that the witnesses did not provide sufficient proof of the crime for which the ex-PAC's were accused. Frank LaRue from the Center of Legal Attention for Human Rights (*Centro de Atención Legal para los Derechos Humanos-CALDH*) called the ruling "a legal scandal." "They argued that there was not sufficient evidence in the oral testimonies but this is untrue, because there were testimonies from eyewitnesses of the massacre, as well as forensic reports from the exhumations and other proof sufficient to confirm the involvement of all three defendants," said LaRue. The verdicts against the three ex-PAC's were annulled, but they were not released. The court ordered another trial at a later date.<sup>14</sup>

We pulled into town. Someone was supposed to be waiting for us at the main bus terminal, so we stopped to ask a young boy, who was riding his bicycle, for directions. He knew the way and we followed slowly behind him as he pedaled like mad, leading us right into the terminal. We did not know who would be waiting for us, so Belén jumped out of the car and began scanning the lot. I spotted the waiting woman right away. She was the only one who paid attention to our arrival. I waited for the woman to look over at me and acknowledged in a glance that yes, we were the ones she was waiting for. She smiled and came over to the car. She was a middle-aged Achi woman with a beautiful face and clear golden-brown eyes that seemed to both absorb and reflect the light of the sun. I called Belén back over, and the woman got in the car with us, guiding us to the church. The roads were mostly white compacted earth or cobblestone, reflecting so much light I could feel my pupils close down to tiny points against the glare.

"It's not far," she said. "Just a little farther." We pulled into the main plaza, and as is customary, the massive, whitewashed church occupied its special place in the center of town overlooking the plaza. A small market was underway, consisting mostly of vendors who lived in town. Sundays and Thursdays were the biggest market days when people from the surrounding mountain villages would come to town, often setting out on foot as early as 3 a.m. to arrive in Rabinal at dawn. They would

<sup>14</sup> *elPeriodico Guatemala*, "Anulan pena de muerte a ex-PAC," by Edwin Palacios, February 26, 1999, pg. 31.

sell whatever assortment of products they had, make just enough money to buy a few basic necessities and walk back up to their villages the same day.

I parked the car in front of the big, iron gate leading to the private interior of the church compound. Our hostess got out of the car. "Wait here. I'll go find *Padre Roberto*," she said.

A few minutes later, he came out smiling, a friendly, casual, energetic type, saying something like, "*Ha! Han llegado las españolas!*" (The Spaniards have arrived!) Gé and I told him where we were actually from. "Oh?!" He told us that he had some work to do and would meet with us later on. In the meantime he had arranged for us to have lunch with two young Spanish nurses who had been working with the parish through a national, State-sponsored health program to deliver badly needed health services to rural communities.

Before taking us to meet the nurses, he showed us where we would sleep that night. It was a small, dark room behind the main living quarters of the parish divided into even smaller spaces by thin plywood panels that had been thrown up to create three separate little bedrooms. Each room had an old, dank and dusty mattress upon a flimsy aluminum frame with worn-out springs. I must have paused in the doorway a little too long. I think that I might have had a surprised or slightly disgusted look on my face, because the *Padre* said, "Come on in. It's just a little dust. It won't hurt you," he seemed amused by my hesitance.

"Oh no. No problem," I said, trying to cover up, irritated with myself for having revealed my gut reaction to the place. "This is just fine," I said clutching my sleeping bag tightly.

"If you hear voices in the night, don't be afraid," he said more serious now. "In this room many people have revealed their secrets of suffering. Through these walls those people continue to have a voice." He was talking about people from the Recuperation of the Historic Memory (REMHI) project conducted by the Office of Human Rights of the Archbishop. This was one of the rooms used to receive testimonies from victims and witnesses of the violence and atrocities that occurred during the war.

Marian and Marta, the two nurses, were waiting for us over at the little school where they had set up their living quarters for the next year. They had been in Rabinal for four months and were genuinely happy to see some other foreigners. They took us to a tiny, dark café, with a small, open-air, interior patio, one of several little restaurants the nurses frequented when they were in town. Most of the time they spent hiking to outlying villages to hold medical consultations and training sessions on aspects of health. They worked in 10 different villages, vis-

iting each twice a month. In their absence, *guardianes de salud* (health guardians) had been selected in each community to monitor the health of local inhabitants as a way to stay on top of any dangerous health hazards, such as serious injuries that needed immediate medical attention or sudden outbreaks of diseases, such as cholera. The nurses worked together with *guardianes*, traditional healers and midwives in an effort to round out health services in rural areas, something that has always been lacking in the Guatemalan countryside.

I asked what the main health problems were. As I suspected they were diarrhea, parasites, gastritis, skin infections and muscular pains from carrying extremely heavy loads for long distances. The nurses also told me that many people talk of pain in their hearts, that they cannot swallow food, that there is a ball in their throat that won't let them breathe, that they suffer from chronic headaches, and prolonged periods of time with feelings of anguish and sadness. "Our diagnosis for people with these symptoms is usually severe depression," said Marta. Poverty, the precariousness of life in which they live and memories of the violence are all contributing factors to this depression.

Following this, Marian added, "but I wouldn't say that everyone is depressed all of the time. I've been around these people a lot of times when they laugh and laugh over just about anything to the point where they are ready to burst." It made me think of Indian people at home in the Pacific Northwest. So many live truly rugged lives, enduring countless heartbreaks and a disproportionate number of unbelievably tragic deaths of loved ones. At the same time their sense of humor is fine-tuned, and laughter, the companion of sorrow, is the saving grace. Never do I laugh with so much hysterical abandon as I do when I am in the company of other Indian people, and it feels so good.

Over lunch we talked about Archbishop Juan Gerardi, the REMHI report and the use of the Catholic Church to gather and record testimonies. A temporary museum exhibit had been set up in one of the rooms at the parish illustrating the massacre that took place in the nearby village of Rio Negro on March 13, 1982. We talked about the war. I felt strange that we could discuss it so openly in a public place. The woman who owned the restaurant, Estella, and her three daughters were the only other people present. Maybe it is okay, I thought.

Being in Guatemala has given me a new sense of paranoia, and depending on what I am talking about, I often feel the need to look over my shoulder, to know who is around me, how close they are, if they can hear what is being said and so on. It is a paranoia that is shared by almost every Guatemalan I have met so far, not something that is really talked about, though its presence is undeniable – invisible, yet oppressive. The truth is hid-





*Counterclockwise: Gé, Marian, Marta and author listening to Estella (standing) recount her memories of the war.*

den somewhere beneath layers and layers of lies that are constantly shifting, blurring and changing; one accusation washing over the next, never allowing the illusion to dissipate lest there be a moment of clarity revealing what really happened and why. Deceit and violence were, and still are, used to further the agenda of those who hold the reins of power. There is no respect, no justice and no explanation.

Estella had been listening in. At one point in our conversation, she passed by our table in the dark corner and Marta asked her a question. I can't even remember what she asked, but it opened up a floodgate. "I couldn't help hearing what you all were talking about," she said. "I am thirty now. In the early eighties it was really bad here in Rabinal. I was a teenager then. I remember one day when there was a procession through the main plaza to celebrate Guatemala's Independence from Spain [September 15, 1881]. Every year all the kids from the local schools joined in this procession. I was there with my younger siblings. Marimba music was playing, and lots of people had gathered. All of a sudden soldiers came into the area and opened fire on the crowd and the whole scene turned into complete chaos and everyone began to run, because we were all being fired at. I grabbed the hands of my siblings and we ran. Dead bodies were strewn everywhere, just blood and mangled corpses and we had to jump over them and through them to get away."

As she talked, her voice rose to a fevered pitch, but the expression on her face was calm and emotionless, almost as if she were talking about the weather, or some other matter-of-fact bit of news. I remember watching

her face in amazement. The stories, the details – they all flowed out almost of their own accord.

"I can still see it all as clearly as if it just happened. Every time I close my eyes, I see all of those bodies," she said, shutting her eyes for a brief moment and then slowly opening them up again. "Sometimes I get really bad headaches and I can't sleep at night. I can't forget, even if I want to. Maybe only when I die.

"After that time, we stayed in our houses. The streets were deserted. Nobody went out. Only if it was absolutely necessary, like when we needed more food, then someone would go out just to get what they needed as quickly as possible, return home and stay there." She told us that she lost one uncle and she was there when they found him. "His eyes and tongue had been cut out and his ears were cut off. His genitals were cut off too," she said, "and they had been stuffed in his mouth. The loss of lives here in town were not nearly as high as those suffered by the poor Achi people who lived in the mountains, though. The army was looking for the guerrillas and they accused the Achi people of being guerrillas, or at least supporters, but that wasn't true." She went on and on and on, barely taking a breath and we just listened. "In the mountains they gathered up the people and tortured them. Women and little girls were separated out and the soldiers forced them to dance in front of them. They told them, 'dance for us like you dance with the guerrillas.' Imagine that," she said. "The Achi girls and women are very humble, very shy. They tried to dance because they had to, then they were raped, all the while being insulted. They called them pigs, dirty animals, supporters of the guerrilla. When they were done with them,

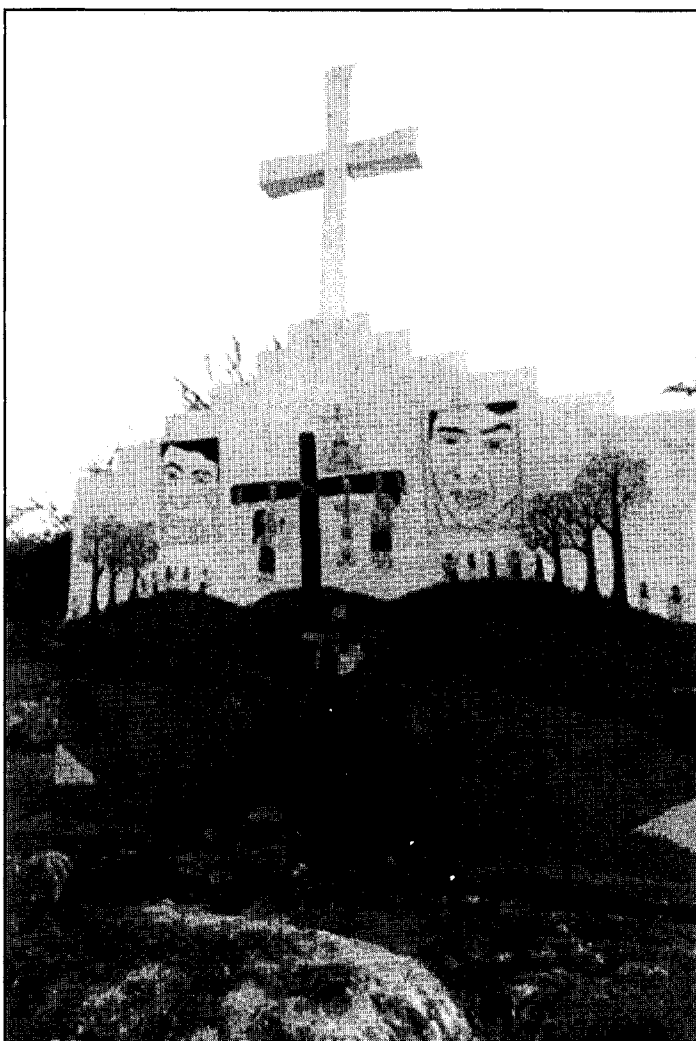
they often tortured and murdered them.”

Estella’s youngest daughter, who was maybe four or five, sat on the ground near her mother’s feet as the tragic, horrifying accounts came pouring out. Her two older girls sat quietly at a table in another corner of the small restaurant with their schoolbooks opened, but they were listening, not studying. “I tell my children everything,” she continued. “They need to know what happened here.” Belén got up from our table and went and sat at another one. She folded her arms on the tabletop, laid her head down and tried to sleep. She said that she had a horrible headache.

Estella described the soldiers and the Civil Self-Defense Patrol (PAC), and the fear that they invoked in the people. “They were like Gods, well no, not Gods,” she said correcting herself. “God couldn’t be capable of this kind of evil, but they had immense power over the people, and they demanded and got whatever they wanted. One time I had to bring them food, because if they asked for food – *frijoles*, *tortillas*, *refrescos* [drinks] – anything, then we would have to bring it to them. I was terrified. They weren’t like people. You couldn’t look at them. You had to bow down, lower your head, never look up at them. That is the kind of power they had. The more fear and terror they put into the people, the greater their power became.”

She told us that at one point the army deemed the whole area around Rabinal a guerrilla zone. “Because of this,” she said, “the army sent helicopters out over Rabinal to bomb the whole region, to annihilate everyone and everything in sight. They had been given exact coordinates on the map, and following those coordinates they arrived at what should have been their target zone. People below saw the choppers and they knew what was going to happen. Many people prayed and prayed to God for help, fearing the worst as the choppers circled above, over and over. The pilots searched and searched for Rabinal and the villages, but all they could see in its place was an immense lake that covered the entire region. They never sited Rabinal, only a huge lake where their target should have been, so they turned around and left. God is good,” she said, crediting the illusion of the lake as a divine act of God in order to spare the people from extermination. Because the pilots could not find Rabinal from above, however, ground troops entered the region by way of dirt roads shortly thereafter and proceeded to massacre any “guerrillas” they could find. She concluded her story by acknowledging that the subsequent killings were bad, but that not everyone died, as would have been the case if the helicopters had located their target from above.

The nurses told me later that they have heard ver-



*Monument to the memory of the 177 women and children massacred at Rio Negro on March 13, 1982*

sions of this same story again and again around Rabinal. There is no lake there now, but there are many legends and stories among the Mayan people of the region that tell of the huge lagoon that covered the entire valley long ago.

Even though I have been in Guatemala for 11 months, this was the first time I had heard in detail some of what happened during the war, and it shook me up pretty badly. After lunch, we went for a walk through town. Along the way, I looked at each person I passed and if they were over a certain age, old enough to have been alive during the war, I could not help but wonder what their story was. The nurses took us to the end of town to the cemetery where Achi people were buried. Remains of the victims of the Rio Negro massacre, and two other massacres had recently been exhumed and reburied in this cemetery. Three massive concrete, block-like structures had been erected. On each of the four sides, the history of the event was written, and the names of the deceased were listed. Graphic paintings illustrated various tortures suffered by the people. In one painting,

women and children hung from a cross by their necks, their hands tied behind their backs.

As I stood before this monument, I felt an overpowering heaviness and intensity in the air that commanded my complete presence of heart and mind. It seemed to ask of me silence, respect and reflection. The burial mound of the victims extended out approximately 50 meters from the monument toward the military base that sat right beyond the perimeter of the cemetery.

We left the cemetery and headed back to the parish. An old Indian man was walking toward us. As we approached one another, I could see he was stumbling and staggering, just barely able to walk. "He is a drunk," Marian told me. "There are lots like him. He might make it a little further down the road before passing out. In the

night someone might steal anything he has, maybe his clothes, and he will get up tomorrow and just go on like that." As I watched him pass, an intense, unbearable pain and hurt filled me and I could feel my heart breaking.

That night we met *Padre Roberto*. After the long drive, the heat of this lowland valley, the stories we heard over lunch, and the visit to the cemetery, I was completely exhausted. He, on the other hand, was totally wound up. "So, what are you interested in knowing?" he asked. Belén was our spokesperson. I was too tired to interject much, so again I just listened; in fact, we all did. The conversation was between Belén and the *Padre* and she was shocked by what he had to say.

He talked about his work with the people and how he was trying to help them find solutions to so many social and economic problems that they faced. He had helped to organize the people for cattle projects among other things. "That isn't what a priest's mission is supposed to be," Belén argued. "Isn't your mission to provide people with the spiritual foundation that they need, to bring them the message of Christ, to fill their lives with hope and love? There are social and political organizations that are qualified to help people with their material needs." Why did he feel that he was qualified to take on responsibilities relating to people's material well being?

"How can I only make sure that people go to mass when there are so many other problems that need to be dealt with first?" he retorted. "There are material needs as well as spiritual needs. And what good is conducting mass at all when everyone in attendance is starving? You have to deal with the real issues at hand, to be flexible, to adjust and adapt.

"We come here with our ideas from our own world," he said, "and we ignorantly assume that we have all the answers for everyone else." He explained how during his time in Rabinal, he had developed a great deal of respect for the people. "These people are far more spiritual, more religious than we will ever be." He went on to say that he felt a deep admiration for them; an admiration for their strength to endure all that they have been through, and an admiration for their sincerity and kindness despite it all. "When I see a woman here with her child and witness the tenderness, warmth and love that she gives that child, that to me is divinity itself. I probably learn more from them than they learn from me. I have never known a more humble, dignified, and loving people. They are the ones who inspire me to lead mass. In Spain, it's not the same. The last time I went home, I was completely uninspired and had nothing to say to the people. So many of them go to church simply to fulfill their responsibility to their weekly ritual and



*Author standing next to the Rio Negro Monument. The sign reads, "Peace is not a gift. It is the fruit of the blood of thousands of Mayan and mestizo Guatemalan brothers and sisters who died during the political violence that occurred in Xococ and in other places of Rabinal. It will never be forgotten and it remains present in the memory of all of the survivors."*

for that time they try to be holy. Here the people live that holiness every day. Everything is sacred. It isn't just one or two hours a week at church. To be out in nature, that is to be close to God. Mayan people still hold a respectful relationship to the earth. They still understand and we need to look to them to learn those values again."

The *Padre* admitted to us later that he was going through his own personal crisis. What was he really doing here? Was he making a difference for these people? Did his work matter? Should he stay or should he move on? He had come here just six years earlier and what he saw, what he was learning was completely changing him, the way he thought, the way he felt. He was being opened up to a much bigger view of reality than the one from which he came. And he could not go back. I liked him and I could relate to how he thought and felt. He was Catholic, because he came from Spain, but when I asked him whether or not it was important to convert people to the Catholic faith, he said no.

"Do you think one religion is more important or more truthful than another?" I asked. Again his answer was no. It was the essence of the person's spirit that was the most important, not the institution within which they practiced their faith. Each religion in its purest form holds a piece of the truth, and it is what we choose to do with that truth that seems to matter the most.

We woke up early the next morning. It was Sunday, *Día de la Plaza*, and the *Padre* was holding two morning masses. The 8:30 a.m. mass was the one attended by most of the Maya Achi people who came into town from surrounding villages for market day. I was a little late arriv-

ing at the church and my friends had already gone in before me, so I sat towards the back so as not to be too much of a disturbance. In his service the *Padre* spoke about the spirit of the mountains, relating to his audience that Jesus was like the Mayan people. When Jesus wanted to talk with God, he too had gone to the mountains, he said, and he found God in the spirit of the mountain. He talked about how important it was for the people to always continue to respect the mountains and to continue to conduct their ceremonies there. He drew comparisons between the Bible and Mayan cosmology, accentuating the similarities rather than the differences.

The *Padre's* voice echoed through the cool, dark, massive, concrete structure over an ancient PA system that scratched and muffled every word before projecting it outwards. I found it hard to pay attention. I could not understand most of what he said. Just the same I tried to sit quietly and respectfully. I wondered how others were feeling. Some of those in attendance most likely knew some Spanish, but it was almost certainly their second language. Each person's Spanish-language ability would depend on how much interaction they had had outside of their own community, whether they worked at the local market or migrated to the Coast to work on the *fincas* (plantations) cutting sugar cane, picking coffee or harvesting hibiscus. Many of the women do not speak Spanish at all. I know the small elderly Achi woman who sat next to me barely reaching my shoulders didn't understand Spanish.

At one point everyone knelt down while a prayer was said. I followed the little lady next to me and went down on my knees. When the prayer was over we both



*Belén posing (with watermelon) with several women who we talked with at the market.*



Scene from the market on "Día de la Plaza"

sat back onto the pew again. I looked over at her. She looked up at me and smiled patting me gently on the shoulder. She was there with a young girl, who I thought might be her granddaughter.

Throughout the service people drifted in to pay their respects. One of them, a woman carrying a newborn baby girl on her back and holding the hand of another little girl, squeezed in at the end of the row where the grandmother and I sat. The older daughter doted over her baby sister, laughing quietly. Little children sat next to their parents without making a sound. Some of them wiggled around in their seats, but despite their fidgeting, they were amazingly calm, quiet and well-behaved. They looked at everyone around them and when they found someone particularly interesting they stared directly at them with the innocence and curiosity that only a child can get away with. One little doll-sized girl, perhaps two or three years old, dressed in a miniature *guipil* and *corte*, saw me smile at her and in response she broke into a beautiful, heart-melting grin, then ducked down behind the pew. Every few seconds she would slowly raise her head up sideways so that just one eye would catch mine above the top of the pew then quickly duck back down. The little boy next to me saw me smiling at the little girl two rows up and he looked up at me and smiled too. I turned my attention back to *Padre Roberto*, but had to admit that I found all the little kids much more captivating. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the little boy was still watching me. He was particularly interested in my watch, and to get a closer look he leaned over towards me as far as he could until he was practically laid out on

the bench and his little face was right over my wrist.

At the end of mass, we all filed out of the church. It felt good to be back in the warmth of the sun. I was overwhelmed by a strong mix of emotions — hurt and sadness, love and that extreme calm that I slip into when there is nothing I can do to change a particularly difficult or painful situation. I could not quit thinking about the connection these people had to the violence such a short time ago.

After church, we had an appointment to meet with Carlos Chen Osorio at the office of the Coordinator of Widows, Widowers, Orphans and Displaced Maya Achi People of Rabinal (*Coordinadora de Viudas, Viudos, Huerfanos y Desplazados Maya-Achi, Rabinal*). We arrived late at the *Coordinadora* center — a plot of land with a small, simple wooden building that served as the main meeting place, with the beginnings of a carpentry project, a vegetable garden, a well, an outhouse and dogs and chickens running around the yard. Carlos had already gone. As we turned to go he came down the dirt road on his bicycle. He had been checking back periodically to see if we would show up. We greeted one another and followed him to the house of an American woman who is working in Rabinal on her Doctorate in Anthropology. She also volunteers with the *Coordinadora* and a Foundation called the Team of Forensic Anthropology of Guatemala (*Equipo de Antropología Forense de Guatemala*) helping with exhumation and the identification of human remains.

She showed us to the main living area and brought

each of us a tall, cool glass of hibiscus tea. My friends and I introduced ourselves and then we listened to Carlos. "I am from Rio Negro," he began. "I was in the mountains for almost five years. Later I went down to the Cathedral in Coban. From there I spent eight years in San Felipe Retalhuleu." He went back in his memory to the early 80's to a time and place he could never forget.

"It was February 7, 1982 when all of my *companeros* from Rio Negro had their *cedulas* (national identification cards) taken away by the Civil Self-Defense Patrol (PAC) from Xococ. The PAC accused them of burning down Xococ's marketplace and working as the ears of the Guerrilla," he said. "They were told that they could come to Xococ the following Saturday to pick them up. Everyone got ready to go the following week. They brought their sleeping mats and some other things to travel. They planned to pick up their *cedulas*, sleep there overnight and come back the next morning. There were 73 people that left that day — 55 men, 9 women and 9 children. They never returned. On February 13, 1982, they were all killed in Xococ. We still haven't been able to conduct this exhumation. What we heard was that their remains were loaded up in gunny sacks and hidden somewhere else during the same time that we were involved in the exhumation of the Rio Negro massacre." The next month, on March 13, 1982, the army and the PAC from Xococ massacred 177 people — 70 women and 107 children.

"It was after this that many more people fled Rio Negro to hide in the mountains, because they couldn't live there any more. One group went to hide in another community called Los Encuentros where the road goes to Coban, Alta Verapaz. The PAC and the Army found them hiding up in the mountains and killed 79 more *campesinos*.<sup>15</sup>

"Some of the children had escaped and remained in the mountains, but they were really little and they couldn't gather wood to make a fire. They didn't have any food. What we did is take them to the community of Agua Fria. On September 14, 1982, there was another massacre in Agua Fria and the 35 children who had gone there from Rio Negro were finished off.<sup>16</sup>

"There was a total of four massacres at Rio Negro. It

was a very hard blow. Rio Negro is a village where everyone has been displaced.<sup>17</sup> They took refuge wherever they could. A lot of people died in the mountains. Many of them weren't careful enough and they would wash their clothes and leave them hanging out to dry. When the army came along, it was like a target for them. Survivors had to bury their dead in the mountains, because they were unable to carry them to a cemetery. A lot of elders died of hunger in the mountains too. At one massacre, they killed an elder who was 95 years old. The PAC said, 'this old man is a witch and he is one of those who guide the Guerrillas, so let's kill him.' They put him in a big gunny sack and threw him over a cliff where there was a lot of rocks. They threw him to his death. During this time life was terrible. A person couldn't live.

"When they killed my wife's family, she told me that I had to go hide in the mountains, because she had already lost her father, her brothers and sisters and if they killed me then there would only be a few others left. And if some day they kill us too, she said, you don't get tired, don't ever give in. You go and spread the news to many countries about what is happening here."

Shortly after she told Carlos this, she was murdered. "She was six months pregnant when they killed her and my other two children. They killed my whole family," he said.

In 1994 Carlos finally returned to Rabinal and began talking with others who had been around Rio Negro at the time of the massacre 12 years earlier and they formed the *Coordinadora*. Today approximately 900 widows and their children, all from Rabinal, form part of the *Coordinadora*. The objectives of their organization: to seek justice for human-rights violations; to conduct exhumations, to identify remains and lay them to rest with a proper burial in legal cemeteries; to create employment opportunities for widows and orphans, and to help rebuild their homes and their lives.

"We have made the decision to fight, because it is the only thing that we have left. If we leave it like this then they, with all liberty, can continue. It could happen

*Continued on page 18*

<sup>15</sup> The army attacked Los Encuentros with grenades on March 14, 1982 and killed 79 *campesinos*. Fifteen women were "disappeared." All of the houses were burned. CEH Report, *Caso Ilustrativo No. 10, Masacre y Eliminación de la Comunidad de Rio Negro*, Volume 2, pg.34

<sup>16</sup> On September 14, 1982, soldiers and PAC from Xococ arrived to the community of Agua Fria, proceeding to round up all of the people in one of the houses. Under the accusation that these people had fed the Guerrillas, they fired into the house from outside and then lit it on fire. As a result of this action 92 people were killed, among them elders, children and women." CEH Report, *Caso Ilustrativo No. 10*, pg. 34

<sup>17</sup> During the internal armed conflict, an estimated 1 million to 1.5 million people were displaced due to the violence. Of this total, approximately 150,000 are refugees and 20,000 are "Communities of Pueblos in Resistance" (CPR's — a subset of the internally displaced). Statistics from Jack McCarthy, Coordinator of the Peace Program, USAID. The 170,000 refugees and CPR's are the ones who are receiving the majority of attention and assistance from international organizations and NGO's to return to their lands or find new lands and reestablish some semblance of their lives prior to the war. The remaining majority of 830,000 to 1,330,000 displaced victims of the war have received only isolated and sporadic assistance, if any, from international organizations and NGO's. Most still remain displaced from their homelands and are living in conditions of extreme poverty.



## **Background on Rio Negro and Xococ**

Rabinal, Baja Verapaz<sup>18</sup>

*In the early 1970's, Rio Negro was a prosperous Achi community of approximately 800 people on the shores of the Chixoy River. The people lived as agriculturists and fishermen enjoying a close trade relationship with the nearby Achi community of Xococ. Life was peaceful and plentiful.*

*In 1975, the National Institute of Electrification (INDE-Instituto Nacional de Electrificación) went to Rio Negro and approximately 18 other communities that lived along the Chixoy River to present their plan for the construction of the largest hydroelectric dam project in all of Central America. This project was to help solve the problem of insufficient electrical energy in the country. Under the auspices of the Interamerican Development Bank, the International Bank of Reconstruction and Promotion and the World Bank, INDE informed villagers living along the river that the dam would inundate more than 50 kilometers of riverside lands and some tributaries, which would affect the homes of about 3,445 people. INDE informed these people that they were to be displaced and relocated. In 1978, the government declared the proposed flood area a national emergency. Displaced people were promised lands of equal or greater value, which, of course, was not true. Some people moved, because they were forced to, but those from Rio Negro refused. INDE could not understand why inhabitants from Rio Negro were so attached to their lands. Records show, however, that indigenous people, since 330 AC, have inhabited this area. There are several religious ceremonial centers and more than 50 archaeological sites along the river valley. Relocation would have meant complete desertion and alienation from the life and the land that defined the people.*

*The construction of the dam was imminent, however, and when the people from Rio Negro refused to leave they were threatened. They could relocate on their own accord or be forced.*

*At this time, the Peasant Unity Committee (CUC-Comite de Unidad Campesina) was working in Rio Negro teaching literacy and human rights courses. They also supported and advised the inhabitants of Rio Negro on how to stand up for their rights and make their demands before INDE.*

*In 1979, The Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP-Ejercito Guerrillero de los Pobres) arrived in Rio Negro to meet with local leaders and the CUC and they talked to them about the revolution. They talked of putting up a fight to kick out the government and the Army. The EGP lived in the mountains, but they came down to Rio Negro from time to time.*

*In 1980 the dam was underway and the people of Rio Negro continued to resist forced relocation.*

*On March 5, 1980 two people from Rio Negro were accused of stealing beans from the dam workers comedor (small restaurant). The two were found in another village by two soldiers and an agent from the Traveling Military Police (PMA-Policia Militar Ambulante) and chased on foot all the way back to Rio Negro. When the two accused entered the village they shouted out to the others that they were being chased down by the military. Local men surrounded the soldiers and a fight ensued when an intoxicated man from Rio Negro struck the PMA agent. To defend himself, the agent fired, killing seven men from Rio Negro.*

*The next day the army announced that Rio Negro was a community that had been influenced by the Guerrillas and that is why the people were so persistent in their refusal to leave their lands.*

*From that point on, members of the army made frequent visits to Rio Negro. They went door to door harassing people and asking for the weapon that their fellow soldier had left during the first confrontation on March 5<sup>th</sup>. Soldiers illegally detained several campesinos from Rio Negro and the*

<sup>18</sup> Summarized and translated from the CEH Report, *Caso Ilustrativo no. 10 – Masacre y Eliminación de la comunidad de Rio Negro*, pgs. 29 – 33.

### **Background continued**

*first cases of selective "disappeared" community leaders from Rio Negro occurred in 1981.*

*In order to avoid further military repression, representatives from Rio Negro went to the military zones of Coban and the military base in Rabinal to ask for forgiveness for what happened on March 5<sup>th</sup>, but the military accused them of being Guerrillas and threatened to kill them.*

*At the same time that all of this was happening in Rio Negro, their trade neighbors of Xococ were also undergoing military repression.*

*In February 1982 a group of armed men, presumably guerrillas, burned down the market in Xococ and killed 5 people. The Army blamed the Guerrillas and the campesinos from Rio Negro. As a result, the people of Xococ broke all trade relations with their neighbors from Rio Negro and declared them their enemies. As one man from Xococ put it, "When the war began, friendship was lost."*

*The community of Xococ solicited the Army to help them organize a Civil Self-Defense Patrol (PAC). Rio Negro was officially declared to be Guerrilla. The PAC of Xococ was armed, trained and guided by the Army.*

*The first act committed against Rio Negro by the PAC of Xococ was 1982. The PAC, in the name of the military base in Rabinal, summoned 150 people from Rio Negro and accused them of participating with the guerrilla and of burning the market in Xococ. Those from Rio Negro said that the market had been a benefit to them and that they had no motive to burn it. To avoid aggravating the situation further, they agreed to come to Xococ and help to build a new market. The PAC took their cedula (identification cards) away and ordered them to come to Xococ the following week to get them back. This is the point from which Carlos began his testimony.*

*At 6:00am, 12 members of the Army and 15 PAC from Xococ entered Rio Negro. They went from house to house asking for the men, but none of them were home. They had spent the night in the mountains praying for security. Upon hearing this, the soldiers affirmed that it was certain that they were with the Guerrillas. Then they demanded that everyone come out of their houses to participate in a reunion. The soldiers and PAC ate breakfast, taking any food they could find from the houses. When they finished eating, they sacked the village. Later they rounded up the women. They put on marimba music and forced them to dance. The youngest women were separated out and raped. Throughout the entire day, the soldiers and the PAC terrorized the people, torturing and killing many along a forced hike three kilometers up into the mountains. Some were shot. Some were cut up with machetes. Children that were too small to walk on their own were taken by the ankles and slammed head first into the rocks. By about 5:00pm they finished the massacre and headed back to Xococ with 18 children who were still alive.*



again. But we can keep fighting, and even if we don't achieve what we are hoping for, we can at least make known some of what happened here. I thank God, because I am doing what my wife asked of me. I have been to the United States three times to talk about what happened in Guatemala. Several of us spoke at schools and churches so that people could know what happened. At least there I was able to talk about this court case in Coban with the three ex-PAC members from Xococ who were accused of taking part in the Rio Negro massacre and then had their sentences annulled. I got so mad! Why don't they do justice? That is their job after all, not favoring the assassins. I think that the most important thing to them is money, because they receive money to *not* do justice."

Together with their families, widows from the nearby village of Pacux, the Catholic Church and friends, the *Coordinadora* decided to conduct the exhumation of Rio Negro. "It was very difficult," said Carlos, "but after that first one, we have been able to do several more." A personal friend of Carlos' from the US helped to find funding needed to construct the three monuments that we visited in the cemetery the day before.

At different times since my arrival in Guatemala, I have heard about some of the massacres, how bodies were sometimes left unburied or even lined up along the roadside as a warning to others. Knowing some of the different beliefs North American Indian people have about their dead made me think about the belief that the spirits of victims still roam the earth. I wanted to ask the Mayan people about those who have died in a violent, inhumane way. What happens to those spirits who have never received a proper burial? Were they trapped in the earth in that place where their life was cut short? Would they still be able to travel to the spirit world? I asked Carlos about this.

"The day before yesterday, I had dream," he said, "and all of the cadavers of my dead relations from Rio Negro were thrown everywhere, their hands and bodies were tied up. I saw it like this in my dream. I was in the midst of them when something struck me in the leg. I reached down to grab it, picked it up and turned it around. I saw that it was a skull of one of the dead. I believe that they are still alive, that their spirits are still present and that perhaps they are telling me that they still want to see that justice is done for what happened to them."

He told me about the exhumations. "In the ceremonies that we do during the exhumations, we ask forgiveness from the earth, that she had to witness, hear and receive so many tears, so much blood. We always begin the exhumations with a Mayan ceremony and offer thanks to the earth for having given us a place to keep all of those who were killed as result of what happened here. We then take the remains

and carry them to a legal cemetery for reburial," he said.

"For such a long time the widows have known where some of their dead are buried, but they haven't been able to visit those places, because the areas are controlled by those who are responsible for the murders. To finally take the remains of their dead to a legal cemetery is very significant for the widows. These aren't the bones of animals. They are the bones of human beings. The widows are very worried about all of it.

"For the past couple years there have been many good-hearted people who go to the place where the Rio Negro massacre occurred. They go to conduct ceremonies. Even the *Padre* has done baptisms there. Sick people go there to seek healing. For us this is a place of sacred earth, because the people who died there did many things when they were alive. They worked for their families; they worked for their community. They were people — humble people — catechists, midwives, people, very simple people, each with their richness, the wealth that is their spirit that remains there permanently. For this



*A girl in the market selling medicinal herbs*

reason people go there to ask for blessings from those spirits."

In the area of human rights, the *Coordinadora* is looking for lawyers who specialize in human rights to help to follow through on denunciations made to the Public Ministry for the exhumation of some 65 clandestine graves, and the prosecution of those who are responsible for theft, murders and massacres. "When the widows fled their homes, oftentimes their lands were taken over by the PAC. They want to go back, but they can't. The criminals, the assassins, they are all free. We live next door to people who we know were responsible for the murders of our families, but we can't do anything about it. We are living with them. We look at each other when we pass in the street. 'Adios,' we greet each other. But we know that this person is a criminal, an assassin," said Carlos.

The *Coordinadora* is also approaching the local mayor regarding a request for the aid of one or two registrars, who can help the widows and their children recreate legal identification, documentation and records. Many orphans do not have personal identification cards or birth certificates. Although, a lot of widows have taken a second husband they are unable to remarry legally, because they do not have the death certificates for their first husbands. In Rabinal alone, there are more than 5,000 widows in this position. The Catholic Church is in the process of assisting the *Coordinadora* in opening a small office space and helping them find at least one lawyer who can work with them to get started.

A carpentry workshop has been set up at the *Coordinadora's* headquarters and they hope to train the orphans, who are now young adults, and give them skills that will provide them with a living. They hope to have a mechanics' workshop next for the same purpose. "It's hard," said Carlos. "There is a lot of work ahead to awaken the minds of the orphans. Many of them don't want anything to do with any of this. We are trying to help them understand what happened, though. Maybe then they will stop resisting us and join us, fight alongside us so that we can bring the truth to light." They are also looking for loans so that the widows can begin their own projects, such as raising cattle and chickens, and planting vegetable gardens.

Assistance in the construction of new homes is an urgent need. "We need the support of the government for this," said Carlos. "We have asked them to visit our villages, to see how the people have been living for the past 17 years, but they never come. Instead they tell us, let's forget the past. You guys need to stop talking about what happened. It is done and it remains in the past. You need to forget it and look to the future now. We don't know if they will ever come through for us. Up until now there has been nothing. A promise and nothing more.

"Nothing has changed. Even today, we continue to  
Institute of Current World Affairs

be robbed by the same ex-army and ex-PAC members that stole from us for all those years. They have become accustomed to a life of crime. How are they all of a sudden going to quit? In the times of [strongman-President] Rios Montt, the Army sent a lot of people to rob and kill and now these same people are destroying the peace that was signed – they are going to steal that too," he said.

The lives of many people in the *Coordinadora* are still being threatened. "The widows are very strong," he continued. "They are beginning to say, if we don't do something now, then they will never respect us. Fine, they say, threaten us. If you're going to kill us, kill us, but we are going to say what happened. We are going to tell what we know. Nobody has been killed from our organization. We have received threats, but they are anonymous. I've been threatened and accused of being with the guerrilla, that I am a *commandante* and that is why I am organizing the people in the *Coordinadora*. 'We are going to kidnap you. We are going to kill you,' they say. What they have actually done, is destroy some of the projects that I help set up in Pacux. Nothing has happened to me personally; for the moment, they haven't touched me, but they have tried. When I returned from the pilgrimage to Rio Negro last year, they fired at me, but I didn't get hit.

"Now it is 1999. We have been at it for five years and we are tired. Why? Because there is no justice. All of our denunciations to the Public Ministry have been archived and forgotten. When will we see justice done against those who are responsible for my wife, my son, my daughter and my father? When? But the law does nothing to those who everyone knows are responsible for the massacres. If we ever tried to take matters into our own hands, it would be a different story. They would throw us in jail right away. We are tired, but we will never give up."

\*

*I had a flower once,  
a flower like no other.*

*It did not die when the winter came.  
Its colors remained bright — in the wind, the cold,  
the rain.*

*The angry tried to kill it because of its endurance.  
But alone it withstood many —  
alone she withstood many.*

*Because she was rooted in the earth.  
"The old men say the earth only endures —  
You spoke truly, you are right."*

- Hilly -

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Phone: (603) 643-5548

E-Mail: [ICWA@valley.net](mailto:ICWA@valley.net)

Fax: (603) 643-9599

Web Site: [www.icwa.org](http://www.icwa.org)

Executive Director: Peter Bird Martin

Program Administrator: Gary L. Hansen

Publications Manager: Ellen Kozak

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Four West Wheelock Street

Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 USA