

ICWA LETTERS

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An Uncertain Return

GUATEMALA CITY, Guatemala

September, 1999

By Chenoa Egawa

Dante maneuvered skillfully through the winding mountain passes, around blind corners with forest on one side and steep embankments and ravines on the other, up through the misty, cool highlands and torrential rains and back down through hot, humid tropical forests of the lowland valleys for hour after hour after hour. I sat straight up in the front seat of the truck, obliged to by my seat belt, which gripped me harder with every bump and jolt as Dante sped through rock, gravel, mud and streams. *Concentrate, concentrate.* My eyes squinted painfully on the road ahead as I fought to maintain my equilibrium. Another wave of nausea surged over me.

"Pull over, Dante!" I said.

He quickly whipped the car over to the side of the road. I unbuckled my seat belt and staggered out of the vehicle like a drunk, hunching down near the ground. Yamila jumped out of the car after me, my companion in nausea. She and I had been taking turns sitting up front on this "mission." Both of us were endlessly carsick.

"Make yourself throw up," she said in her Cuban Spanish accent, every syllable barely enunciated and most endings of words left off entirely.

"What?" I groaned.

"Try to throw up. It'll make you feel better," she said.

Unfortunately, where we were pulled over happened to be in a small town next to a store, and I did not want to throw up in front of the shop, where several young guys sat watching me with curiosity.

"*No estoy borracha, sólo bien mareada del camino*" [I'm not drunk, just nauseated from the road] I explained, giving them a pained, crooked smile, my eyes at half-mast.

"*Tómate un Alka Seltzer*," they advised. That would help me out. Alka Seltzer is considered the cure for everything down here.

Dante had seen my face go pale a few kilometers back and made a detour off the main road to this little town where I could drink his special remedy for car sickness, bubbly mineral water with salt and lime.

"It's natural," he told me. "You don't need pills."

There were five of us — including myself — on this joint mission of the

World Food Program (WFP) and the Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama (INCAP):

- 1) Gertrudes Lambiza (Portuguese), Technical Assistant of WFP and team leader.
- 2) Dante Corzo (Guatemalan), WFP chauffeur, specially trained in "high resistance," self-defense and personnel security in the *campo* [field]. Before becoming a chauffeur, he was an electrical engineer.
- 3) Yamila Llerena (Cuban), a Doctor from INCAP who had arrived from Cuba only ten days earlier. And
- 4) Kali Erickson (American), a Nutritionist volunteering at INCAP and working on graduate research.

This WFP/INCAP joint mission was an attempt on behalf of both to work together in areas that would mutually benefit their organizations and the people they aim to assist. Gertrudes was concerned that our small team of five had two Americans and a Cuban. As a *gringa*, I take constant criticism from many of my European and Latin Americans friends for my country's policies abroad and for the stereotype of the "typical gringo," whom they define as "egocentric, ignorant and excessive."

"Oh, but not you!" they say. At least this time the Cubans accompanied me on the list of "least desirable," for different reasons of course. Dante was our only Guatemalan. Except for him, we were a team of young, foreign women.

BACKGROUND

WFP is a United Nations (UN) Agency that was created by the UN General Assembly in 1961 with the ambitious mandate to help eradicate hunger and poverty in the world. WFP works on short-term emergency food-aid projects and long-term rehabilitation and development projects. They are best known for the former, and are often one of the first international organizations on the scene to assist populations in need of food during and after wars and natural disasters. Since 1973, WFP has been in Guatemala working in both emergency food aid and rehabilitation and development. Both short- and long-term projects are done in coordination with agencies of the Guatemalan government.

The goal of our mission was to monitor one of the WFP emergency projects that began in May 1997 and ended in June 1999. In this particular project, WFP provided newly resettled Guatemalan communities of "Returnees," "Ex-Communities of Populations in Resistance" and "Internally Displaced Peoples" with emergency food aid, including corn, beans, canned sardines and cooking oil, for periods of three to nine months during the resettlement process. The three populations above can be classified as follows:

- 1) Returnees [*Retornados*]: The estimated 150,000 people who fled to Mexico, primarily during the most violent years of Guatemala's civil war in the early 1980's. In

Mexico they received extensive support from international organizations, non-governmental organizations and church groups for such things as basic and higher education, medical care and community and business development. To date, 42,000 Returnees have been repatriated to Guatemala with the help of the Guatemalan government, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization of Migration (OIM). Other Returnees have come back to Guatemala on their own accord and are not included in UNHCR and IOM statistics. Many more chose to stay in Mexico and become Mexican citizens. The exact numbers of the two latter groups are not known.

- 2) Ex-Communities of Populations in Resistance, or Ex-CPRs [*Ex-Comunidades de Poblaciones en Resistencia*]: A "subset" of Internally Displaced Peoples within Guatemala, estimated to consist of approximately 20,000 individuals. CPRs were highly organized mobile communities made up of people who fled into the mountains during the late 1970's and early 1980's. There they hid in the fog and tree cover of the highland forests, fleeing whenever the army got too close, surviving on grass, herbs, roots or whatever else they could find. Some CPRs lived hiding in the Guatemalan highland mountains for almost 15 years.

- 3) Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs) or Uprooted Peoples [*Desplazados Internos*, or *Desarraigados*]: Estimated to be over 1 million people, they stayed in Guatemala, but also fled from original homelands to escape the violence. They migrated to urban centers where it was safer, or scattered throughout the country, living with family members who could take them in.

Returnees and Ex-CPRs negotiated with the Guatemalan government, the IOM and other organizations to select resettlement lands for their communities after the signing of the Peace Accords in December 1996. Following resettlement negotiations, the Guatemalan government purchased lands for Returnee and Ex-CPR communities. For the first two years of the resettlement process, communities were exempt from making payments on loans in order to give them time to establish themselves on their new lands, particularly to plant crops and realize at least one harvest. After the two-year grace period, they began making payments to the government to purchase their lands outright. IDPs were often left out of this process altogether. On an international level, there is little known about the plight of IDPs, even though they are by far the largest group of displaced peoples as a result of the war. They not only lack the high international profile of the other two groups, they also tend to lack the necessary political organization to negotiate and secure their own lands.

Returnees and Ex-CPRs who were lucky enough to have resettlement lands were usually moved onto "new" lands, and rarely back onto their original homelands. When they abandoned their homes during the war to flee

from the violence and terror, their lands were taken over and occupied by others also in need of them. If the people were lucky, their relocation was at least in the same region of their origin. Many were not so lucky and their new lands were in completely different climatic zones with distinct soil types and terrain. Relatively speaking, however, they have been much more fortunate than the multitudes of IDPs who remain landless.

The WFP emergency food aid project that we were to evaluate had helped keep many people from starving during the first critical months of the resettlement process. At that time there were no food crops to harvest. There were no homes. Everything had to be built from the ground up. Temporary food aid allowed people to stay in the communities, plant their crops and build their new homes without having to worry about food security in the short term. Without that aid, people would have been obliged to leave the communities, migrate to coastal *fincas* to work for a pittance (15 Quetzales, or \$2.00/day) and buy their food. Had this been the case, no one would have been present to re-build the communities.

I was able to go on the mission because a friend of mine works with WFP. We had talked a lot about the situation of the Returnees, Ex-CPRs and IDPs that she had been working with through WFP, and when the mission came up, she invited me to come along so that I could see for myself what she was talking about. Before I could go, however, she had to get the director's approval. The director was concerned that I did not have any experience in development work and told my friend that it might be too hard for me.

According to my friend, she told her boss that even though I did not have experience in this type of work, I had been in Guatemala for over a year working with Mayan people, women in particular, and writing articles on a wide range of indigenous issues; and that I was Native American and had worked in native communities/reservations in the States for years before coming to Guatemala. So I ended up going as an "anthropologist-type specialist" on indigenous women's issues, even though I think that was taking it a bit far. Compared to the rest of the team, however, I did have the most experience working with native people and, of course, a unique and beneficial perspective. Besides all that good stuff, the fact that I was volunteering to carry out some of the workload AND cover my own expenses was not too shabby for them, either. I was fortunate to be able to go. I think very few people, nationally or internationally, get such an opportunity.

THE MISSION

There were three WFP/INCAP teams for this evaluation mission. Each team went to a different region of the

country to revisit the communities that WFP had assisted with emergency food aid in the previous year. Our team visited six communities in two departments, El Quiché in the Western Highlands and Alta Verapaz in the Northern Highlands. In El Quiché, most people are Ixil Mayans and in Alta Verapaz, K'eqchi Mayans. Quiché communities were Ex-CPRs. Alta Verapaz communities were IDPs.¹ In one Alta Verapaz community, Cantihá, the people were actually displaced in "times of peace," kicked out of their own community by fellow members due to internal conflicts. This situation is not uncommon. Often times, a community has a mix of ex-Civilian Self-Defense Patrols (*Patrulleros de Autodefensa Civil* or PAC), ex-Guerrillas, Ex-CPRs and IDPs. Additionally, insufficient lands and extreme poverty give rise to potential conflict.

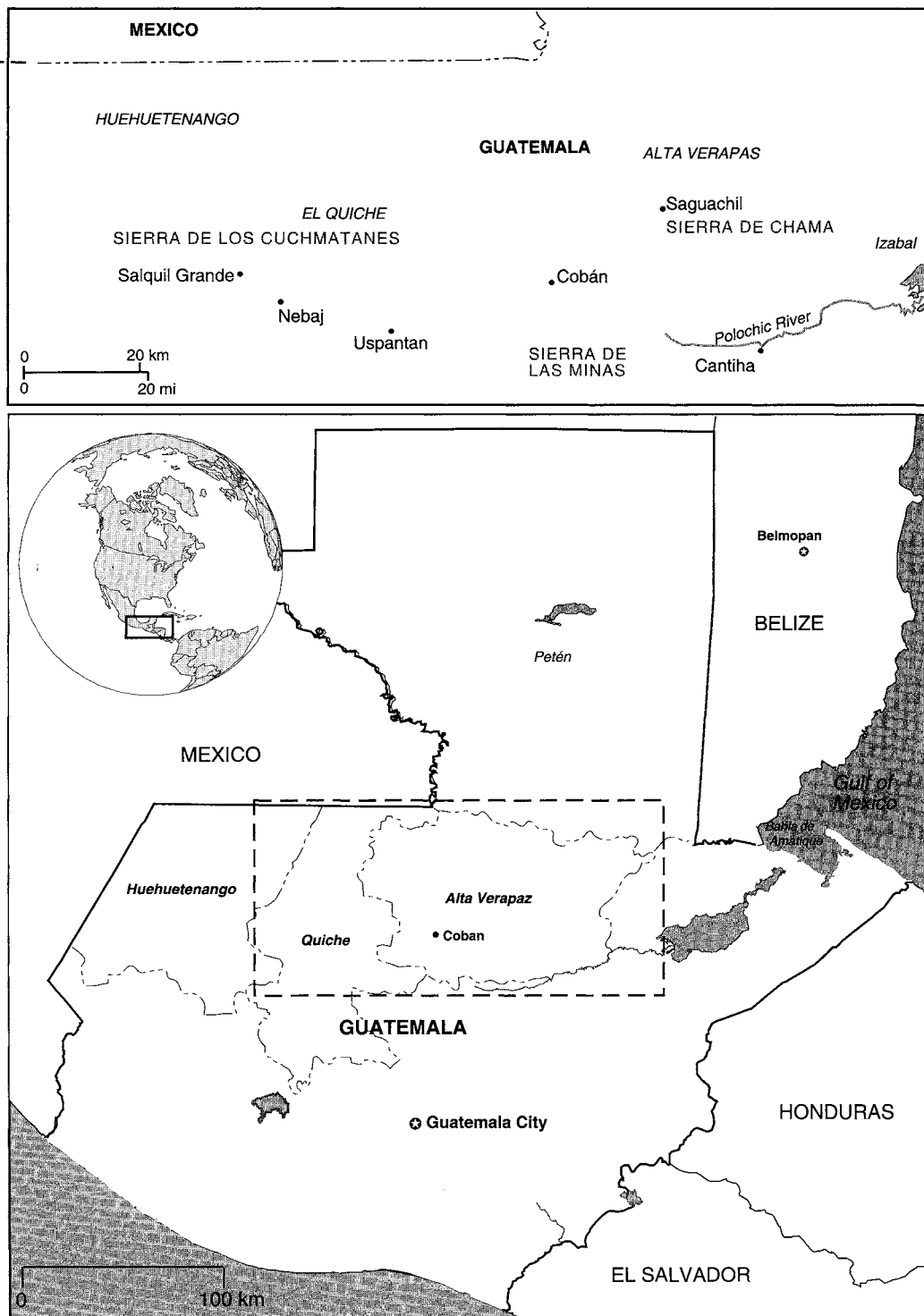
Our Quiché/Alta Verapaz mission lasted six days. During that time we traveled 710 miles and drove for a total of 36 hours. We covered terrain ranging from humid tropical rainforests to cold, highland mountains, plunging as low as 130 feet above sea level and then climbing back up again to altitudes as high as 8,700 feet above sea level. It was a rugged and eye-opening journey.

In each community we verified whether or not WFP food donations were received in the previous year and in what condition; how food was distributed and whether or not it was helpful. More importantly, we observed the current situation of each community in terms of food security, nutrition and general overall health of the people. We made it clear up front, however, that we were not there to offer any new projects. Our presence constituted an evaluation of past aid and "unfortunately, WFP had nothing more to offer at this time."

This is what team leader Gertrudes, stated at the outset when we met with each community's leadership, persons who were not always easy to find. We had tried to contact each community ahead of time regarding our visit, but the messages did not always make it through. Messages are transmitted by radio from local and regional offices, a system of communication that is not always reliable. Regardless, the protocol for entering any community is to locate the community leadership first. Once we met with local leaders, explained the purpose of our visit and received their okay, they would help us with the rest. They rounded up the people with whom we wished to speak; they took us to visit their primary schools; they gave us permission to visit some of the homes on our own to speak with the mothers, and they allowed us to take pictures of their children.

Without heeding this protocol first, it was not advisable to go into communities at all. There is a lot of mistrust of outsiders, and with good reason. One only has to look at the recent past to understand why. The fact that

¹ WFP supported Returnees with food aid also, and that mission was carried out in May 1999. Most Returnee communities are located in the departments of Huehuetenango, El Petén and San Marcos.



our visits were not always announced in advance could be considered disrespectful but unavoidable in some cases. On the other hand, it proved to have some advantages.

"If they know we are coming ahead of time," said Gertrudes, "then they shut down the schools and every-one stops what they are doing and come to see us."

Arriving unannounced would allow us to see the kids

in the schools, visit some of the homes and see how things function on a "normal" day without external interruptions. Many communities are used to frequent visits by aid organizations and they know what to say to each one in order to be eligible for possible assistance. When they know ahead of time that there will be visitors from a particular aid organization it gives them time to prepare the community to interact with visitors in an attempt to solicit new projects. Those who work for different organizations find this highly frustrating, because "people

only tell us what they think we want to hear to receive new projects." Who can blame them, though? What alternatives do these communities *really* have to poverty, malnutrition, and lack of work, infrastructure and land?

There are so many basic and essential unmet needs for human survival in Guatemalan communities, especially those that are undergoing resettlement after the war. Of course people will tell you what you want to hear if it means you will help them out. And who taught people how to react this way? How was paternalism created in the first place, for what purpose and to whose benefit?

EL QUICHE

We stayed in Nebaj, Quiche, our first night, having driven all day to arrive there from Guatemala City. The next morning we headed out for Primavera [Spring] a community of Ex-CPRs, Ixiles who had been resettled there for just over two years. One hour out of Nebaj, we pulled into Salquil Grande, the nearest community to Primavera. The dirt road ended there and we would walk the rest of the way. It started raining the minute we stepped out of the truck in Salquil's main plaza. We went into the community center to meet with the local Mayor and he told us how to get to Primavera.

"It is close, he said, "only about 15 or 20 minutes on foot." Just the same, he would send a man from Salquil with us to show us the way. While we were gone he would keep an eye on our vehicle.

Back outside we unloaded our things from the truck — rain ponchos, huge sheets of plastic, umbrellas and interview materials. It was early morning and chilly. At this altitude of 8,700 feet, the heavy mist and fog was broken only occasionally by intermittent torrential rains. As a result, all the hillsides were lush green. It was really quite beautiful.

A crowd of people from Salquil gathered around us as we put on extra layers of T-shirts, sweaters and rain ponchos. I felt ridiculous taking so much precaution to stay dry. Our guide watched me. I looked at him, feeling a little embarrassed with my excessive clothing. All he had



From left: Kali, Gé, Yamila, Author and our guide on the trail from Salquil Grande to Primavera.

on was a threadbare T-shirt and an equally threadbare long-sleeve button-down shirt over it.

"*Qué frío, no?*" [It's cold, isn't it?] I said.

"*Sí, qué frío,*" [Yes, it's cold] he said, grinning. I could hear his Ixil Spanish accent. Ixil was his first language and his Spanish was minimal.

I gave him an extra plastic sheet that I had in my backpack and we were on our way. It was raining hard as we started down the steep hillside. The footpath had turned into a small stream, slippery with clay and mud. I followed closely behind him. Every now and then he would stop, turn around and smile at me from beneath his bright green plastic sheet, then he would glance up the hill, possibly to make sure the rest of the team was not sliding down the hillside on their butts. He kept saying, "*qué frío, qué frío,*" and he would laugh.

We went all the way down to the river below and then climbed back up the other side to Primavera, stopping in at the small pre-primary and primary school. The teachers came out to greet us and sent one of the kids to look for the community leaders. I looked into the pre-primary classroom where about ten little girls and boys sat at their desks. They looked up shyly, then tucked their chins down into their necks and some of them giggled and laughed amongst themselves. Their teachers sent them out for an early recess to give us a place to meet.

"Have a seat," they said.

There were three rows of miniature desks and seats — three rows of four-foot planks for desktops and three

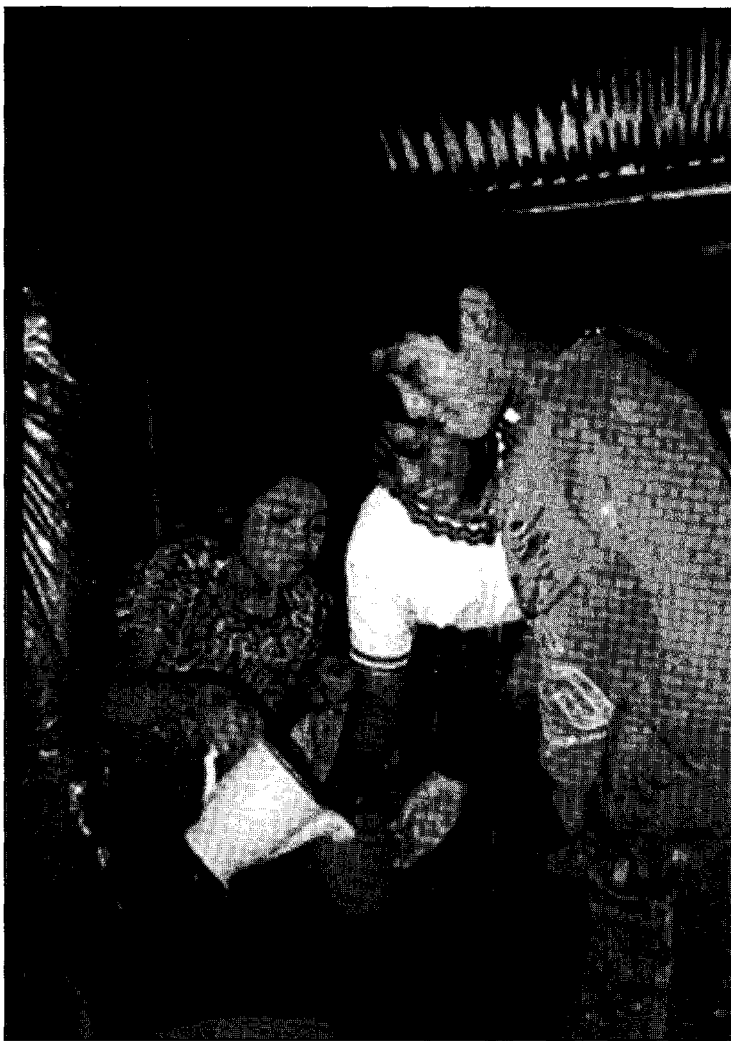
rows of four-foot, skinny tree poles for seats. The walls of the school were like wooden fences covered with sheets of plastic similar to the one I had loaned to our guide. The roof was corrugated tin paneling.

With only two to three hours in each community, we had a lot of ground to cover, so we would divide up the tasks. Gertrudes would talk with the men on a wide range of subjects, such as the availability of food and land, soil quality, infrastructure, natural resources, labor, community organization and demographics. Yamila, the doctor, and Kali, the nutritionist, would talk with the local health promoters and mothers about health issues, prevalent illnesses and diseases, availability of doctors, medicines, and so on. I would go from house to house and talk with the women, mostly mothers, about daily food consumption, eating habits and food availability. Dante would assist wherever he could be most useful.

After a short visit with the teachers, we all went our separate ways. Gertrudes went with the men and Yamila and Kali with the health promoters. I went with one of the teachers, my Ixil translator, to visit some of the women in their homes. Dante went to collect water samples. Part of INCAP's role in this joint mission was to test the water supply in each community to see whether it was contaminated or not. It seemed to be contaminated everywhere we went, but apparently no one had ever actually conducted water tests before to obtain scientific proof. Even so, having proof was one thing; doing something to address the results was another. INCAP was primarily interested in testing water for the presence of fecal coliform, a contaminant from human and animal excrement — a bacteria that can cause severe diarrhea, poor long-term health, and when left untreated, dehydration and death, especially among children.

This was not my first time going in with pen and pad to interview people, but it was my first time asking people I had never met before such questions as, "What do you and your family usually eat? Where do you get the food? Do you buy it or do you grow it? Do you eat it every day, less than three times a week, more than three times a week, once a month? When is the food supply scarcer, and when is it more available? When food is scarce, who gets to eat first?"

I realized how important it was to gather this information in order to analyze the situations in the communities, but I was not comfortable with the questions or the procedure. It felt to me as though I was saying, *so nice to meet you, but what I am really here for is to get these questions*



Primary school students from Primavera serving up the morning snack of atol, an oatmeal or corn beverage.

answered as quickly as possible, so that we can get on to the next community. How else can this type of information be gathered when there is not sufficient time or resources to spend out in the field in order to make the procedure a little more humane? I talked with Gertrudes later about my discomfort. She understood, telling me that everyone goes through these feelings at some time or another when doing this type of work.

"You have to remember though, we are here to help," she said. "We have helped them and they know that. We aren't a group of strangers who are coming here for the first time and asking a lot of questions. I know it's hard, but we have been here before with aid and now we are back. No, we don't have anything more to offer at this time, but we are here to see how the people are doing now, to let them know that we haven't forgotten them."

I knew this was true, and the people were grateful. They always thanked us. They told us how helpful the food aid had been and how much they appreciated WFP's help.

However, the situation is still critical and now there is no more aid. Yes, it was helpful then, but now what?

A lot of skill is required to be good at this kind of work. It demands a mix of kindness, compassion and understanding, plus authority, organization and efficiency. Whether or not you or someone else from your office has been there before is not as important as how individuals representing that office conduct themselves in the field. How do team members relate to the people? Do they carry out their work with compassion and understanding, because they truly care and want to help other human beings, or do they consider it just a job to perform? Do they do it for the development of their own careers and consider these people only as the subjects of their research?

To be efficient *and* to be humane in this type of work is a delicate balance. One has to know how to engage a community, to be personable, outgoing and positive in order to gain the confidence of the people right away and get answers to tough questions. The leadership of the com-

the bush? What about all those new outhouses? Nobody uses them? Not used to them? Oh, not yet inaugurated."

The teacher and I went to the first home. The father, mother, and two of their children — a little boy and a baby girl — were there. A kettle of potatoes and a blackened coffeepot boiled away over the cooking fire in the middle of the dirt floor of the one-room home. The walls, like those of the school, were constructed from wood panels, more like fences than walls, and the roof was made of corrugated tin panels.

Another organization had been working in Primavera to set up family gardens, providing seeds, terracing techniques for soil conservation and irrigation systems. The same organization had also provided each family with its own water tap outside — a luxury. The young mother tended the food and the young father crocheted a shoulder bag as I began the interview. There were no old people, not here in Primavera and not in any of the other communities I visited later. I was supposed to interview the woman, but when a man is present he is the one who will answer the questions. Women automatically fall silent.

"What food do you eat on a daily basis?" I asked sheepishly. This day would be potatoes, obviously, but daily food usually consisted of corn tortillas, chili, salt and coffee with lots of sugar. Accompaniments to these basics were black beans "less than three times per week," and some vegetables from the gardens, "but the soil was so bad for gardens that a lot of plants did not make it much past small sprouts." They could buy some vegetables in the market in Salquil Grande, though — tomatoes, cabbage and carrots — but vegetables did not make up a big part of

the diet. Corn was *the* staple. Tortillas and coffee are a baby's first foods after nursing.

We were getting ready to go on to the next house when the young couple offered the teacher and me a cup of coffee. We accepted and I was happy to visit with the people on a natural conversational level, having finished all of my questioning. The teacher told me that the little boy who was sitting by his father's side was in her class. The father then told me that his son got up that morning for school, stepped outside to look up at the sky, then came back into the house.

"It's raining," he said, as if he was disappointed,



All of the students bunched together for a group photos before our team left Primavera.

munity may know who you are, and they may be comfortable with you, but that does not mean that the families you visit in their own homes are, especially in regard to potentially embarrassing questions. There has to be a human connection made between the interviewer and the interviewee almost immediately in order to conduct the interviews without seeming superior and invasive.

Gertrudes was good at it. It was impressive to watch her interact so naturally with the people. I, on the other hand, could not help but feel intrusive. In part, these feelings were due to the fact that I, personally, did not have any prior experience with the people. That, however, was not the only reason. "What kind of toilet do you use? Out in



Two of the mothers from Las Promesas cooked the morning snack for the children over an open fire. This atol is made from corn.

"so I won't be going to school today."

It was so funny imagining such a young child saying that. He could not have been more than three or four years of age. It was funny too, because it was the rainy season and it rained almost every day.

I thanked the young couple for the coffee and their time, and the teacher and I went on to visit other homes. There was a woman in the next house. The central fire was going and a little kettle of herbs boiled over the coals. She continued grinding corn in the dark corner of the room and began working the *masa* into tortillas as I interviewed her. She was a quiet woman and I could not muster up the outgoing, friendly, personable qualities I needed to break through her calm silence and seeming disinterest in my questions. Entering a home and starting into these questions went against my moral fiber. It seemed disrespectful on some level, with or without personal history, as though I was some privileged *gringa* from the North coming to analyze the life of this poor woman and her

family. Just how miserable are you anyway, Miss? My own discomfort did not help the situation become any more friendly and conversational, but I could not overcome it. Thank God for the presence of the teacher.

I thought the woman was home alone, until I saw the mound of blankets shift on the bed and a little head peak out from under them. It was another one of the teacher's students. Some families see the importance of sending their kids to school, some do not. A lot of the children have to go to work with their parents. Many parents would like their children to study, but they cannot afford to buy even pencils and paper. Even the kids who do go to school usually do not go beyond 3rd grade. There simply is no adequate national educational system in place to encourage education, particularly in indigenous communities.

We visited one more home before going back to the school to regroup with the others. The mother was there with two of her daughters, and a neighbor woman stopped in to listen to the interview. The success of each interview had a lot to do with the openness and willingness of the interviewee and my ability to be personable and natural, to be myself. This one went better, but interviewing people on this level was not something that I ever wanted to become truly "natural" to me.

I was the first one to arrive back at the school and the other teacher invited me to join her primary class. I took a seat alongside a couple of little boys. All the kids were excited to have me there. We talked and laughed. They wanted to know words in English and they taught me words in Ixil. They sang songs for me and then they shared their morning snacks with me — cookies and oatmeal. They were beautiful — filled with life, curiosity, openness and honesty — just precious, still pure of heart.

My team was back and so were the rains. We thanked the teachers and the community leaders for the visit. All the kids gathered around me, shouting, "take our picture, take our picture!" I snapped several.

"*Orásh talinghá*," I said. The kids had taught me to say "good-bye children" in Ixil.

"*Orásh, Chenoa! Orásh, Chenoa!*" they shouted out, jumping up and down and laughing.

Our guide led us through the rain, back up along the muddy trail to where we had left the truck in Salquil Grande. On the way to the next community, Nueva Esperanza [New Hope] each of us talked about our interviews and some of our findings. June, July and August were the hardest months of the year, because anyone who had their own corn and beans had harvested them in May. The next harvest would not be until October.

There would be no work for the men outside of the communities on the big *fincas* until the time of the coffee and banana harvests in September, October and November, and the sugarcane harvests in November and December. Even with the work, less than \$2.00/day did not go very far.

Food supplies in the community were minimal. Yamila, the Cuban Doctor, had visited some families whose children showed signs of malnutrition — swollen bellies, discolored and broken hair, white patches on their skin, listlessness. Parasites, respiratory and skin infections were also common. There was no clinic and no doctors. They did have local volunteer health promoters who were organized and trained through a national program of the Ministry of Health. They work as volunteers monitoring the health of the community, conducting very basic first aid procedures and dispensing a few basic medicines. None of them are actual doctors and in emergencies they have to send for help from the nearest hospital. A doctor visits Primavera once a month.

Conditions in Nueva Esperanza were worse, even though the community had a nice, brand-new school made of concrete block, a small local store and a corn-grinding facility. People here were also Ex-CPRs, Ixiles, and they had been resettled in the community for three years. My first impression of the community was that it was too small for the 18 families who lived there and the homes were too close together. Wherever possible, corn had been planted — in front of homes, in between homes, along the footpaths. A few odd chickens and pigs ran in and out of the scanty corn stocks. Those who had animals raised them to sell, so they could buy basic staples. For special *fiestas* or celebrations, people might butcher an animal for their own consumption, but these occasions were rare.

We were greeted by Francisco Marroquin, President of the Association of Resettlement (*Asociación de Reasentimiento*) and President of the Committee for Integrated Development (*Comité de Desarrollo Integral*), both of which were local, Quiche organizations. He was a handsome young man, who seemed like a conscientious and intelligent leader. We talked with him for a short while before splitting up throughout the community. He told us that the people of Nueva Esperanza have other lands outside the main community settlement, but a lot of it was on very steep inclines and loss of fertile topsoil was a problem. Most of the corn and beans from the previous harvest had been lost, consumed by wild pigs that live in the mountains. There is a lack of seeds and agricultural tools. When people moved here, they had no possessions whatsoever. More time is still needed to establish continuous cycles of planting and harvesting, but with lack of money and resources, people are always forced to migrate for work and cannot be home to tend their fields. It is a vicious cycle. Requests have been made on behalf of the community's leadership for technical assistance on soil conservation, terracing and reforestation

methods, but so far no projects have been confirmed. Climate and soil in this region are supposed to be ideal for coffee, and the people have requested technical assistance to begin coffee production, too. Unfortunately, coffee takes three years before the first harvest can be realized and people need income and alternatives now. Just the same, long-term, sustainable projects have to be integrated into the communities, otherwise people will only be surviving from one day to the next.

When Francisco found out that we had a doctor with us, he asked if we could visit one home where there was a sick baby. Yamila and Kali went in to check on the child. It was not necessary for all of us to go. I went to visit two women at one home who were on Nueva Esperanza's Women's Committee (*Comité de Mujeres*). The one who lived there sat weaving a new *huipil* overshirt and the other woman helped her pull the threads through the warp. The colors were beautiful — turquoise, green, white, yellow, red, black, pink and blue — all exquisitely combined in complex designs and patterns.

"Do you sell your weavings?" I asked.

"No," she said, "This one is for me and everything else I make is for my daughters."

I introduced myself and told them the purpose of my visit and began the interview. After every question I asked, they talked between themselves in Ixil for so long I almost forgot which question they were answering. The woman who lived in this one-room house with walls of plywood and roof of corrugated-tin had five children and another on the way. The children sat quietly at first, watching the interview, then began wrestling around until the littlest guy got picked on by a bigger sibling and started screaming and crying. He went off and sat behind the door by himself, hiding from the bigger kids and was quiet again. Even to my untrained eye, I could see that the children were unhealthy, maybe because of parasites, maybe malnutrition, probably both.

My interview was stilted. The women wanted to know why I was asking all the questions. Did I have a project to offer? I went over the whole introductory presentation with them again, understanding how odd it must seem to be hit with so many questions. There was a Women's Committee, but only a few women from Nueva Esperanza were involved with it. The Committee set up the local corn-grinding facility and managed the school snack program for the children. They were interested in doing more, but they lacked the resources.

Yamila and Kali showed up and asked the two women more questions about health. I asked where the bathroom was. The woman of the house had her daughter point it out for me. I looked in that direction and saw a brand new toilet bowl perched up high above the cornstalks on a big concrete foundation, a fancy composting toilet from

some other organization's project. The walls had not been put up yet.

"That one?" I asked, a little surprised. The girl saw that I was looking at the new composting toilet and smiled.

"No, the one beyond that," she said.

I was happy to know that I did not have to relieve myself on that big, new toilet in the sky, although the aerial view of Nueva Esperanza would have been interesting. I made my way through the cornstalks, the mud and excrement to the older outhouse, a hole in the ground, and walls of old plastic tarp hanging precariously on a leaning wooden pole frame that threatened to collapse from the next strong wind.

I went back to the truck and Dante was waiting there.

"This is hard," I told him.

"I know," he said. "The only thing that's changed for these people since the war ended is that now they aren't being hunted down and they have a roof over their heads. Other than that, nothing has changed."

The others arrived back at the truck. Yamila was quiet and pensive. We asked how the baby was doing. Her face was expressionless and her voice flat when she told us that the infant was really sick and probably would not live much longer. It would die of malnutrition and there was nothing we could do about it.

On the road to Paraíso [Paradise] Yamila stared out the window as we drove through the countryside — a multitude of shades of green. Tears rolled gently down her cheeks. We were all silent.

In Paraíso, we met in the community's town hall where everyone had been gathered. The situation was no better for this community of Ex-CPRs either, although their leadership seemed quite adept politically. Twenty-six Ixil families had been living at Paraíso for two years. I spoke with the women who gathered off to one side of the town hall. They were strong, dignified and outspoken and I found it very easy to interact with them. During my interview there were always at least one or two men hovering around the perimeter of our circle to monitor my questions and the women's answers.

ALTA VERAPAZ

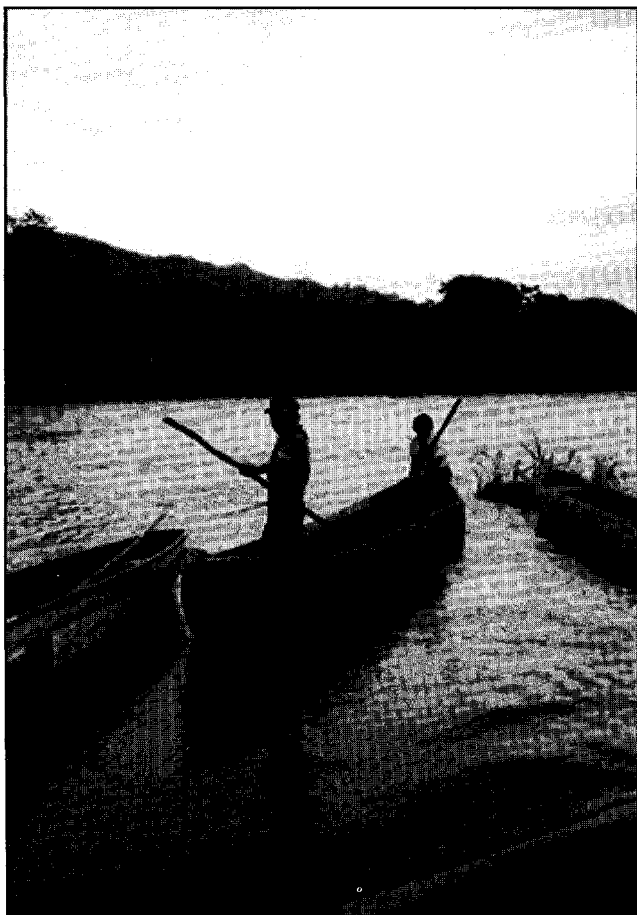
Having completed the Quiche portion of the mission we were off to Alta Verapaz across the highway via Río Uspantan. The road was long and it wound through all varieties of rich Guatemalan flora — palms, bananas, bromeliads, pines, cedars, mahoganies, cornfields and coffee plants. When I was not car sick I daydreamed, inspired by the beautiful green vegetation and mysterious

fog. I remembered what one of my Kaqchikel Mayan friends told me about how the spirits of the ancestors dwell in the mists. I remembered what another Pocomam Mayan friend told me of the God, or the spirit of the fog (*El Dios de la Neblina*) and how the Pocomames used to call upon that entity during times of war to hide the people from the enemy. The sunlight shone through the transparent light green of the new leaves of the corn plants. Adobe walls stood out in the fields without roofs, remnants of past homes going back to the earth.

We stayed in Coban that night. Over the next two days we visited three more communities in the tropical lowlands. The people were all Kaqchis, IDPs. Their situations were equally sad, their outlook was grimmer still than the communities we had visited in the Quiche. Returnees and Ex-CPRs that are registered as such with the government have received lands that they are in the process of purchasing as a result of previous negotiations. IDPs have all of the same problems as Returnees and Ex-CPRs regarding lack of food, infrastructure and resources. They tend to have even more complications than the other two groups regarding lands. Their land needs have only been considered in a few rare cases; otherwise, they have been largely forgotten.

We crossed the Polochic River in a 15-foot dugout canoe — the local ferry service — to visit the community of Cantihá, 150 feet above sea level in a hot, humid region. Here 120 families were displaced from their original community, Tampur 1, kicked out due to internal conflicts, the origins of which were unknown to our team. With nowhere else to go they illegally settled on somebody else's land down along the river's edge, planted crops and set up makeshift homes. When Hurricane Mitch came at the end of last year, the river flooded and destroyed all their crops and they were forced to move on again. They returned to Tampur 1, having no other options. Tampur 1 has a large land base, so they moved to the far reaches of that land, settled and began planting and cultivating their crops. They are there illegally, though, and further problems are expected.

After crossing the river, we hiked for 20 minutes under the hot sun through the *milpas* (cornfield) to Cantihá. We met the community leader in the shade of the "community center" — a frame structure built from poles and covered with sheets of heavy black plastic. There were no walls, which was better in this case. The black plastic roof absorbed so much heat from the sun that standing beneath it was like standing in an oven. The leader took a short metal rod in one hand and banged it upon some other piece of scrap metal, making a loud, shrill sound that resonated throughout the community. This was the signal for everyone to gather at the center for a meeting. People slowly gathered, coming from all directions, women, men, youth and tiny children. A lot of the small children had no clothes. Some of them looked fairly healthy, but many showed the classic signs of malnutri-



Our team was ferried across the river to Cantihá in this dugout canoe. The pilot and co-pilot posed for this photo after dropping us on the shore.

tion and parasitism, exaggerated swollen bellies and discolored hair and skin. A couple of the children had measles; a couple of others had chicken pox. Their parents were worried, because they did not know what these illnesses were.

Again we carried out our interviews. Kali was with me this time since all of the women were gathered in the same place. Yamila was tending to sick children. When Kali asked how long the women breast-feed their babies, one woman shouted out something in Keqchi and all of the others started laughing. I looked to our interpreter to find out what she had said. "She said they breast feed each child for five years!" We were all laughing then.

Our translator, Josefina, was a young girl who had studied through the equivalent of ninth grade. In a conversation I had with her, she told me that she had left her community to study at the secondary school in Coban, but this year her father could not afford to send her. Cantihá did not have a school at all, so none of the children were studying. Since Josefina was not able to go to school, she volunteered to work as the community teacher, so that the local children could begin to study. She, herself, was literate in Spanish and Keqchi. The "problem" was that

Josefina wanted to be paid for her work and she was not yet a certified teacher. Even if she was, no one could afford to pay her. The idea died fast. She told me of her dreams to study, to be a teacher and to travel. She shared her dreams with her brother who also studied whenever their father could afford it. It was not as easy for her as it was for her brother, because her dad was more protective of her. He worried about her leaving home. He had, however, allowed her to live with a family in Coban the previous year. There she worked as a maid and a nanny. She tried to study in her spare time, but it was too hard because of her work obligations.

We stayed until all the interviews were done and headed back down to the river a few hours later to catch the canoe ferry back to the other side. One little girl, Maria Isabel, who stayed by my side the whole time I was in Cantihá, walked down to the river with me. Another little girl, Josefina, and an older woman accompanied us, too. The canoe pulled up to the shore and we carefully stepped in and crouched down low in the hull. The pilot and his son, the copilot, guided us out into the current of the muddy, brown river using poles to steer and maneuver the canoe through the rapids to the other side. The woman and the three girls waved to us from the riverbank.

We visited two more communities in Alta Verapaz, Saguachil and Las Promesas — both of which were Keqchis and IDPs. Las Promesas (Promises) was a community of IDPs who had illegally moved onto a *finca* years earlier. As it turned out, this *finca* was one that the government had purchased for a community of Returnees even though they knew there were IDPs already living there. The IDPs were kicked out and the Returnees moved in. In this case, the government promised to help the ousted IDPs find other lands, build a new school and put in a water system. Because of all of the government's promises, the IDPs named their new community Las Promesas. They now have some lands, but not enough to cultivate. In order to plant their crops, they rent lands from a nearby private *finca* owner. They have a new school, minus windows; apparently that "minor" detail was forgotten and most likely will not be completed. They have water, too. It is piped in from a nearby spring and empties into a large, open-air cement holding tank. It is the sole water source for the entire community. All of the drinking, cooking, washing and bathing water comes from the tap that enters into the holding tank. Even grazing cows frequent the water hole. I looked into the big cement holding tank and the water was dark and murky, full of tadpoles and insects. Those were the creatures that were visible to the naked eye. I wondered what kind of microscopic life forms were also flourishing in that water.

* * * *

We were now heading for "home" on the long road from Coban to Guatemala City. The problems in Guatemala are complex and they run deep. Lack of land is one



The "watering hole" at Las Promesas

of the biggest problems. The majority of Guatemalan people are subsistence farmers, but land is becoming more and more scarce. As the rich become richer and the poor become poorer, those times of living off the land are vanishing, but for the majority there are no alternatives.

In all of the communities we visited, people were squeezed onto tiny plots, trying to survive as subsistence farmers. What hope do they have without land? Throughout the entire trip, I kept thinking about US history in the 1800s when Native American people were put onto reservations. Tribes were forced off their original homelands and relocated on lands that the US government did not want – supposed wastelands. The climates, the wildlife, the flora and the fauna were often completely different from the people's original territories. As a result, their traditional lifestyle was no longer possible. Lands were insufficient and many people died of hunger, disease and broken hearts. Mayan communities are undergoing resettlement and relocation on insufficient lands that are not their original homelands. Often times the land is unproductive, the soils completely stripped and barren. The current situation of the Mayans of Guatemala has many similarities to the history of Native Americans of the United States. Does humanity ever truly progress?

And what will WFP do next? A final report is being written on the findings of all three WFP/INCAP teams. In the report, communities will be divided into three categories based on their needs, and recommendations will be made for short-, medium- and long-term strategies.

Observations and classifications of the communities will first be presented to WFP donors to update them on current conditions. The information will then be shared with other organizations to alert them to the needs of these communities. WFP will be able to provide some assistance to communities in the short and medium term, but any long-term projects will depend on other organizations whose mandates relate more specifically to community-development needs.

In the short term, WFP will provide immediate emergency food aid to two of the communities that were visited on this mission and found to be in critical states of malnutrition. Triunfo and Maryland, both of which are located in the Coastal region, fit this description. In both communities, the teams observed children and adults who were near starvation, and living in desperate conditions. WFP did not plan to continue food-aid programs to these communities, because the project was officially completed this past June. Under the circumstances, however, they will provide two additional months of emergency food aid to Triunfo and Maryland. In October, local harvests of corn and beans will begin again and food availability *should* improve. Children and pregnant and nursing mothers are intended to be the sole recipients of food donations. Local church groups and NGOs will help organize community kitchens. The women of the communities will manage food preparation and distribution. Again, this is short-term emergency aid and its impact is minimal, at best, in improving conditions over the long-term. WFP intends to collaborate with INCAP and national and international NGOs to look for more sustain-

able solutions, but it will be a long, slow battle.

In the medium term, WFP will focus on those communities that are beyond the immediate danger of starvation. For these communities, they will meet with donors and NGOs to recommend and implement projects aimed at working with the people to develop a system of food security within the community. One example is WFP's program called "Food for Work," in which community members are given food as an incentive while they are building their homes and communities, planting and tending crops, implementing soil conservation and terracing techniques, etc. WFP may be able to contribute at this level if they can adapt such programs to these communities, after carrying out more specialized missions to define the real needs. Whether or not this will actually happen is still uncertain at this time. They will stand a better chance of taking action if they can work with and have the support of other organizations and the Guatemalan government. This will not be easy. Even though it seems logical for like organizations to share information and strategies with one another, it actually rarely occurs.

In the long-term, WFP will propose strategies to donors and organizations on behalf of those communities that have obtained a more stable level of food security and already have basic infrastructure in place. WFP will recommend that communities have access to credit and technical assistance to initiate business projects. This type of work will depend entirely on the willingness and availability of those organizations whose mandates focus on

community and business development. WFP will be able only to alert others and make suggestions.

My mind was reeling as we sped past the beautiful green mountains, hillsides, valleys and volcanoes of the Guatemalan countryside. I was imagining being at the negotiation table to determine who has what needs, who is needier than the other and *oh my God, it's so hard, they are all so needy. But some are obviously a lot worse off than others, and there are others you have not yet seen, and I know the aid available isn't enough, but what else is there? And Isn't it better to do this then to do nothing? And Yes, of course it is; it's just that it never seems to be enough.*

There are so many variables, so many complications and so much bureaucracy. Will any organizations want to initiate new projects, and if so, will they have the necessary time and resources to do a good job? If there are any future projects, will they be sustainable and long-term, or will they only further entrench the paternalistic relationship that government and some organizations have with the communities? And what about all those communities we did not see — those communities that are completely isolated? Out of sight, out of mind? Will the lives of Guatemala's Mayan majority ever be considered important enough to those who hold power to actually make them want or need to implement positive changes on behalf of their fellow citizens? "You can't be too critical," they tell me, "this country has just come out of 36 years of war and it is going to take a long time to turn things around." I am sure it will. □



Leaving Cantihá

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