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JUSTICE IS BITTERSWEET AS KILLERS ARE SENTENCED FOR 1982 MASSACRE IN GUATEMALA

Salamá, Guatemala – The five former paramilitaries shuffled into the courtroom in this small country town, charged with participating in one the most notorious massacres in Guatemala’s 36-year-long civil war. A week earlier they had been found guilty. Now they awaited a sentence.

The hearing has been graphically portrayed in the blogs of Heidi MacKinnon, a Peace Fellow from the Advocacy Project. Ms McKinnon is volunteering this summer with ADIVIMA, an association which represents massacre survivors and has brought the charges.

The Rio Negro massacre occurred after an indigenous community at Rio Negro refused to relocate and make way for the Chixoy Dam, a massive government energy project supported by the World Bank. Most of the men fled to the hills, fearing an attack. Early on March 13, 1982, army soldiers and a civil patrol from the nearby village of Xococ arrived at Rio Negro, and murdered 177 women and children. Many of the victims were raped and tortured.

The participation of Maya Achi villagers from Xococ in the killing was typical of the way neighbors turned against neighbors in Guatemala’s brutal conflict. But it also gave the recent hearing a distinctly local flavor.

About sixty relatives of the accused men attended the sentencing: “P (from ADIVIMA) was nervous when she realized who we were facing,” writes Ms McKinnon. “She was one of the survivors who brought the case forward and plainly told me that she feared some of the younger men in the crowd might want to harm or kidnap her. They made menacing comments under their breath as we walked the gauntlet and entered the compound. When the families entered the courtroom, no one sat near me for obvious reasons.”

The sentence was issued quickly and each of the five men received a total of 30 years in prison. This brings to eight the number of individuals who have now been jailed for the Rio Negro massacre, and the new verdict represents a vindication for the persistence of Adivima and the relatives of those who died. “Justice was served,” said Juan de Dios García, the Director of ADIVIMA.

Ms. McKinnon agreed: “What I witnessed was a historic event in Guatemala. It was a victory for every survivor.” But she also concedes that the victory was bittersweet: “When you are seated a few feet away from a murderer who is over seventy, speaks no Spanish and has trouble even walking, it can make one pause and wonder whose definition of justice is being served by such a sentence. Who is more culpable, the man who pulled the trigger or the man who bought him the gun and told him who he should kill if he wanted to stay alive and keep his family safe?”

To date, neither the ranking officer who ordered the Río Negro massacre nor any soldiers have been tried, although there is an order outstanding on an army colonel.

Still, the verdict in Salamá could now help ADIVIMA pursue a larger case against the Guatemalan government in the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. The Commission accepted the Río Negro case in March 2008, and ADIVIMA's legal team submitted additional findings last week. ADIVIMA is negotiating with the Guatemalan government to get reparations for those in Río Negro and 27 other villages destroyed by the Chixoy dam project.

ADIVIMA is currently involved in seven other legal cases, and coordinates at least one exhumation of a murder victim each month. Over 4,500 people were killed in the Rabinal region between 1981 and 1983, almost all of them Maya Achi Indians. According to the Guatemalan Commission for Historical Clarification, about 200,000 people died in the country from 1960 to 1996. State forces committed more than 90 percent of executions and forced disappearances.

The Advocacy Project has followed the Chixoy case since 2000 when it helped Jesu Tecu Osorio, one of ADIVIMA's founders, to make the case for relatives at the World Bank in Washington. AP writer Peter Lippman visited Guatemala to report on the case, and AP has since recruited five Peace Fellows to help ADIVIMA's advocacy including Ms. McKinnon.

- Read [Heidi McKinnon's blog](#)
- Read more about the [Chixoy Dam project](#)
- Learn more about [ADIVIMA](#)

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Palestinians face food shortages because of Israeli occupation

The Democracy Workers Rights Center (DWRC) in Palestine sent an open letter to the recent world food security conference in Rome, drawing attention to food shortages in Palestine as a result of the Israeli occupation. In Gaza, 700,000 people are dependent on United Nations food relief.

Bishops back Dale Farm Travellers

Clergy from Anglican and Roman Catholic churches in Essex, England are backing the Dale Farm Travellers in their fight to keep their homes in the face of eviction from the local government. The bishops are concerned about the Council's plans to appeal a May 9 ruling that put off the evictions indefinitely.

EPAF director to speak at international human rights conference

Jose Pablo Baraybar, Director of the Peruvian Forensic Anthropology Team (EPAF), will speak this week at an international human rights conference in the Philippines about his experiences exhuming mass graves. The two-day conference is being held June 16-17, and aims to educate Filipino prosecutors about efforts abroad to hold human rights abusers accountable for their actions.