

WORLD BANK ASKED TO INTERVENE FOLLOWING ARREST OF GUATEMALAN COMMUNITY LEADER

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Washington, DC: Human rights groups have called on the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) to intervene with the Government of Guatemala, following the arrest of Carlos Chen Osorio, a prominent leader of Guatemala's indigenous community and a survivor of the notorious 1982 Rio Negro massacres.

Chen was arrested on Thursday, January 20th in Salama, in the department of Baja Verapaz, and charged with making threats, causing bodily harm to government officials and threatening the internal security of the nation. He was released several hours later, and ordered to appear before a judge every 15 days until a trial date is set. Seven other indigenous community leaders also face arrest.

The Government's move has been denounced as intimidation by Rights Action, the Toronto-based group and AP partner which has supported a decade-long campaign by the Rio Negro survivors to claim compensation and reparations for their 1982 losses. AP profiled the work of the Rio Negro survivors' in 2001 and sent an intern from Georgetown University, Carmen Morcos, to work with Rights Action and the survivors last summer.

The Rio Negro massacres occurred after several indigenous communities were forced to relocate to make way for a large hydroelectric dam at Chixoy. One of the communities, also named Rio Negro, resisted and was attacked by paramilitaries in a series of massacres. A total of 444 men women and children were killed, including Mr. Chen's first wife.

The survivors were resettled in a squalid resettlement center in the Pacux suburb of the town of Rabinal, where they began a long campaign for accountability and compensation. On September 7 last year, an estimated 2000 inhabitants from the dam-affected communities protested at the Chixoy dam.

A day later, they agreed to suspend the protest after the state electric company agreed to negotiations. But on September 14, officials from the company reneged on the agreement and secretly lodged a complaint against Mr. Chen and the other community leaders.

The move to muzzle Chen and the other community leaders is seen as deeply embarrassing for the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, which made several loans to Guatemala during the dictatorship to help with construction of the Chixoy Dam. One of the World Bank's loans was made in 1985, well after the massacres.

For years, Rights Action and other human rights groups have urged the Bank to accept responsibility. The Bank has refused, claiming legal immunity. Instead, it has supported a

project-based approach under which the government would provide support and land for the communities. This falls well short of compensation and reparations – a legal move that would imply liability.

The Bank has also played a role of good offices during the discussions between the Guatemalan government and the community leaders. These discussions are now presumably dead, and the communities face a long, costly and potentially devastating legal process that could well send their leaders to prison.

Rights Action hopes that this demonstration of bad faith by the Guatemalan government will put pressure on the World Bank to intervene. A growing number of other civil society organizations seem inclined to agree. Last November, the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE) issued a 90-page report on Chixoy which disputed the Bank's claim to immunity and suggested several ways of holding the Bank legally accountable.

COHRE and Rights Action are also seeking a ruling from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights as to whether the multilateral banks can be held legally accountable. If accepted, this would create a major legal precedent.

All of this indicates how Chixoy has come to symbolize the human cost of many multilateral infrastructural loans, and the fact that gross human rights abuses continue to haunt societies long after they are committed. This is entirely due to the determination of the Rio Negro survivors and the support of their international allies like Rights Action.

- COHRE/Rights report [“Continuing the Struggle for Justice and Accountability in Guatemala”](#).
- Read [Carmen Morcos'](#) blogs.