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AdvocacyNet  
News Bulletin 129

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## GUATEMALAN MASSACRE SURVIVORS STRUGGLE TO REBURY THEIR DEAD AND PURSUE JUSTICE

August 27, Rabinal, Guatemala: Twenty-five years after 177 indigenous women and children were massacred at Rio Negro, central Guatemala, the search for justice continues. And, as a new publication from the survivors makes clear, the campaign is encountering red tape, a shortage of money and outright intimidation.

According to the recently-published newsletter of Adivima, the survivors' association, 15 massacre victims were exhumed near Rio Negro and reburied this June. But the pace of exhumations has since slowed sharply because of a lack of funds.

In another setback, a judge postponed a hearing early last month to review the case against several former paramilitary fighters indicted for involvement in the massacre, bringing the legal process to a temporary halt.

Meanwhile, at the national level, the Guatemalan Congress approved a new commission against impunity (CIGIC) on August 1, in an attempt to strengthen Guatemala's justice system. But right-wing parties voted against the commission, and many fear the Guatemalan government will provide only lukewarm support.

The Rio Negro massacre was one of the most notorious of Guatemala's long 36-year civil war. It was carried out on March 13 1982 after the Rio Negro community refused to make way for a World-Bank supported dam. After male villagers fled into the hills, the women and children were butchered by civil patrol members from neighboring villages.

The survivors were eventually relocated to Pacux, on the outskirts of the town of Rabinal, from where they continue to demand justice - as evidenced by their new website and newsletter. Abby Weil, a Peace Fellow of the Advocacy Project who volunteered with Adivima this summer, helped edit and organize both publications.

According to the newsletter, several key court cases have stalled because of obstruction from the local authorities and local support for the defendants. Still, Adivima's advocacy has sent 9 paramilitaries to jail for participating in the 1983 massacre. Three were sentenced to more than 50 years.

This is largely due to the courage of survivors, many of whom defied threats to testify. In one of her blogs, Ms Weil describes meeting one witness whose mother was killed in front of her eyes. Those who listened were "emotionally overwhelmed," writes Ms. Weil. But they were also inspired by the women's bravery: "Many witnesses never make it to their court date or are killed shortly after their testimony."

In another blog, Ms Weil writes about the special problems that face indigenous women who seek legal redress. These include intimidation, poverty, long distances, and a lack of understanding from those who record their testimony. According to one group, the Defensoria de la Mujer Indigena (DEMI), 63% of all indigenous women speak a Mayan language, rather than Spanish.

In spite of the challenges, the Rio Negro survivors remain fiercely motivated, like so many community-based human rights advocates. Adivima also tries to address their social and economic needs.

One new project, launched last month, will provide education scholarships of up to \$350 a year for girls who lost relatives in the 1983 massacre. One of the girls, 13 year-old Brenda Noemy Chen Perez, told Ms. Weil that she is so determined to benefit from education that she takes extra lessons in computers and typing over the weekend.

The question for human rights activists, who have monitored Guatemala's tortuous recovery from war, is whether the new impunity commission can end the culture of impunity that has undermined the efforts of Adivima and others.

Right-wing parties voted against the commission and this - coupled with opposition in the communities - has raised fears that the commission will have to rely on the international community for resources and leadership. If so, it would be difficult for the Rio Negro survivors, who still blame the World Bank for having helped to cause the massacre and for refusing to offer compensation.

\* For Adivima's new website, visit <http://www.derechos.net/ativima/>

\* For Adivima's newsletter (English) visit  
<http://www.derechos.net/ativima/en/index.html>

\* For the blogs of Abby Weil visit <http://advocacynet.org/author/abby/>

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