

The Dam and The Massacre (2000)

In the late 1970s the government of Guatemala decided to construct a large hydroelectric dam on the Chixoy River, or Rio Negro (Black River). One of the communities affected, also called Rio Negro, suffered a series of murderous attacks in 1982, just as the dam was being built.

The following year, 1983, the valley was flooded. Those inhabitants of Rio Negro who survived hid in the mountains, and were eventually resettled in a shanty town named Pacux on the outskirts of the provincial capital, Rabinal.



Rio Negro Survivors travel to the site of the massacre in commemoration of their lost family members

The Community: A Hard Life, But Good



Until its destruction in 1982, the community of Rio Negro was located on the bank of the Chixoy River (also known as the Rio Negro, or Black River), in the department of Baja Verapaz. The valley itself had been inhabited by Mayans since the classic Mayan age (300 AD to 900 AD) and was the site for several ceremonial burial places.

The land was a source of livelihood for the villagers, as well as a link to their Mayan past and culture. The Rio Negro community owned 1,440 hectares of land. Roughly half was privately owned. The rest was used by the whole community for pasture and firewood.

Villagers grew crops and fruit trees along the valley, fished in the river, and herded cows on the hills. The women made handicrafts out of the petate palm, which they sold in the nearby market town of Rabinal. The journey took eight hours on foot. The survivors remember it as a hard life, but good.

The Chixoy Dam: Under Attack

By the mid-1970s, Guatemala was in the throes of a severe energy crisis. Over half of the country's export earnings were going to import oil to generate electricity. Blackouts were frequent. In February 1975, in an effort to generate electricity, the state owned National Institute of Electrification (INDE) unveiled a plan to dam the Rio Negro at Chixoy and flood 31 miles of the river valley. Initial funding for the dam came from the Inter-American Development Bank (\$105 million) and Italian aid. The Italian company Cogefar took the lead on construction.



The first roads for the Chixoy project were built in 1976, but that same year a massive earthquake delayed the plan and forced a revision, when the dam site was found to be straddling a seismic fault. Even so, INDE secured a large loan from the World Bank (\$72 million) in 1978. INDE measured out the land that was to be flooded and decided to award between two and three hectares of land to 150 families from Rio Negro.



The precise nature of this compensation plan remains controversial. INDE officials descended on Rio Negro by helicopter and told the villagers that their land was to be flooded. They would have to leave. Under pressure, the villagers negotiated with the INDE team. Together, they came up with a provisional agreement on a resettlement site at Pacux, next to the town of Rabinal. According to the survivors, INDE agreed in writing to provide land and cement-block houses. Building began in Pacux.

Only 20 families from Rio Negro agreed to move to Pacux. They found that after building a few cinderblock houses, INDE's contractors were now using wood instead of cinderblock (which is much stronger and longer-lasting). Disgusted, the 20 families returned to their traditional land. From the community's side, the agreement was null and void.

Both sides dug in their heels. The villagers refused to leave their traditional lands, and a few families even began to build houses on the upper reaches of the valley. INDE was equally adamant. Cogefar, the construction company, went ahead with preliminary construction, and INDE hired a French archaeological team to remove sacred Mayan objects from the ceremonial sites before they were flooded. This was seen as desecration by the villagers.

The Massacres

It did not take long for the dispute to turn violent. Early in March 1980, two young men from Rio Negro were accused of stealing food from the Cogefar canteen. They were seized by three company security officials and taken to the village. This provoked an angry confrontation in which seven villagers and one of the Cogefar guards was killed.



A week later the Rio Negro community suffered another blow when the written record of the agreement with INDE and all the titles to its land were stolen. In response to a request by INDE, two community leaders had taken the documentation to the dam site. Their tortured bodies were discovered several days later. This critically important incident has never been investigated.

In 1981 the noose further tightened around the community of Rio Negro when a new strategy to combat "subversion" was introduced by the Guatemalan government. Part of this strategy involved

One PAC was created near Rio Negro in Xococ, with the aggressive name of "Combative Village of Xococ." The Xococ patrol became an instrument of terror in the government's campaign to break the spirit of Rio Negro. On February 13, 1982, villagers from Rio Negro were told to bring their identification cards to Xococ and return a week later to get new cards. Seventy-three villagers obeyed and were killed. Back in Rio Negro, the remaining men fled into the hills, leaving the women and children behind.

The Destruction of a Community

Were the villagers of Rio Negro killed because they refused to move to make way for the Chixoy dam? The timing is certainly highly suspect. Construction on the dam began in January 1983, almost immediately after the final massacre of 1982. The most authoritative link was made by the Commission of Historical Verification (Truth Commission), which was set up by the United Nations as part of the Guatemalan peace process. The Commission issued its report in February 1999. The Commission selected a series of case studies to illustrate different aspects of the violence. One of the case studies looked at the "massacre and elimination of the Rio Negro community." It described the context of the massacre as being "the hydroelectric project. . .and the resistance of the Rio Negro community to being removed from their land." The case study also concluded that Rabinal had been the target of genocide.

One thing is clear: the loss of the community's land to the Chixoy dam, combined with the massacres, destroyed Rio Negro. According to a census taken by INDE, 791 people had lived in

the community in 1977. By 1983, 444 were dead. The community had cultivated 1,440 hectares of land. By 1983 it was mostly under water. Also lost were the land titles. The dam had drowned Rio Negro's links to its rich Mayan past—its burial grounds, ceremonial sites, and artifacts. (One of the 16 sites that were flooded, at Cahuinal, reemerges every year when the water level falls, bearing more signs of deterioration.) Lost was the pelota playing field, the palm trees that provided the raw material for the petate handicrafts and the medicinal plants that were used for traditional medicine. Two Mayan priests had practiced the ancient art of healing. Both had been murdered. Lost were the houses, the 300 cows, and the 20 horses—all stolen by the patrolmen from Xococ. Those houses that were built on the upper reaches of the valley were burned.

The community had also lost its traditional structure of authority with the murder.

Model Village

After the destruction of Rio Negro, some of the survivors fled into the interior. Those who remained were forced to resettle in Pacux on the outskirts of the town of Rabinal. Pacux represented the government's offer of compensation to the Rio Negro survivors. It was also another element in the government's campaign against subversion, under which villages were torn down and replaced by "model villages" that could be strictly controlled by the military.



Poor Quality: The House in Pacux

Pacux was one such model village. It was situated in the lee of a military base and under constant surveillance. According to Cristobal Sanchez, a survivor, many of the inhabitants were tricked into returning to Pacux after the Guatemalan government declared an amnesty in 1983:

"Some were then beaten and mistreated, and sent to Pacux under compulsion. Some of them were forced to participate in the paramilitary activities of the PACs in 1983."

As late as 1998, men and boys from Pacux were still being regularly detained, according to one March 1999 investigation on Chixoy by the organization Reform the World Bank Campaign (Italy). Sometimes, the inhabitants of Pacux went without food and water for as long as 12 days. The first campaign by the survivors of Rio Negro had as its goal the improvement of conditions in Pacux. A committee of seven was elected in 1984, under the presidency of Cristobal Osorio Sanchez:

"The government did not want to give us houses at that time, because they were still accusing us of having supported the guerrillas. We (the members of the committee) were threatened but we kept up the pressure and received some houses in 1983. But there are still over 40 families whose rights to restitution have not been recognized by INDE. They are living in houses with other families."