



On the Record: The Rio Negro Campaign

Issue 1: The Struggle Against Impunity, April 10, 2000

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From the Editorial Desk

This series of 'On the Record' profiles an inspiring campaign by community activists in Guatemala to recover from years of repression, murder, and poverty.

Written from Guatemala and the United States, it tells how the indigenous inhabitants of Rio Negro, a small community in the Guatemalan highlands, have regained control of their lives after losing over half their population to massacres in 1982.

In 1993, a small group of Rio Negro survivors formed a community organization to investigate the murders and bring the killers to justice. Over the last seven years, with support from friends and nongovernmental organizations abroad, they have made remarkable progress.

But they still suffer from extreme poverty, and they blame this on the loss of their lands to a large dam that was built across the river Chixoy near the original community in 1983.

This week Carlos Chen, one of the community leaders from Rio Negro, arrives in Washington, where he will call on the World Bank to accept its share of responsibility for the losses suffered by the community in the early 1980s and to help with reparations. The Bank made two substantial loans to the Government of Guatemala to help build the dam, in 1978 and 1985.

Carlos Chen's visit coincides with the spring meeting of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, which is expected to attract thousands of activists concerned about the impact of globalization.

This is the context for this new series of 'On the Record'. The series will begin by looking at the background to the 1982 massacres in Rio Negro and go on to profile the efforts of the survivors

to rebuild their community. Subsequent issues will contain a first-hand impression of the Chixoy dam and of the current living conditions of the survivors.

The series will then analyze efforts undertaken by the World Bank to improve the resettlement package for the Rio Negro survivors since 1996, and it will place the Chixoy controversy in the context of the Bank's policies on resettlement and indigenous people. It may also report on this week's activities in Washington, to the extent that they pertain to the Rio Negro campaign.

The series will conclude by looking at the search for social and economic justice in Guatemala in the wake of the recent presidential elections and uncertainty about the future of the peace process.

The mandate of The Advocacy Project is to offer a platform for community activists like Carlos Chen and the Rio Negro survivors. Consistent with this mandate, this series is being undertaken in association with Rights Action, which has supported Carlos and the survivors in their struggle against impunity for the last five years.

At the same time, The Advocacy Project is entirely independent. We do, however, welcome contributions and comments, and will make every effort to publish them. Please email us at info@advocacynet.org and distribute this issue as widely as you see fit.

The series will be written mainly by Peter Lippman from Guatemala, drawing where necessary on background reports that are referenced below and on interviews with Carlos Chen in the United States. These were conducted by Iain Guest, from The Advocacy Project.

The Massacre that Won't Go Away

On the night of March 13, 1982, something unspeakably foul happened in a small community in central Guatemala, named Rio Negro.

In an effort to escape rampaging soldiers and civil defense patrols, 24 villagers from Rio Negro were hiding out in the forests. Around dawn, they heard a sudden commotion down in the village, punctuated by the screams of women -- their wives -- and gunshots. Then there was silence.

Fearful and desperate, the men waited before venturing down to the village. Carlos Chen Oosorio, one of the men, remembers the eerie silence and the smell of coffee that was still cooking on stoves. But there was no sign of people. Then they saw the torn clothing. The telltale path led them up the mountain behind the village to two ditches. Here they found the bodies of 177 women and children. Carlos' pregnant wife and two children were among them.

Ten-year-old Jesus Tecu was one of 18 survivors of the March 13 massacre. Last week, speaking from his home in Guatemala, he told Peter Lippman from The Advocacy Project, how the massacre happened.

Thirty soldiers and armed villagers from the next village of Xococ, who had been formed into a 'civil patrol' by the army to battle left wing insurgents, had come to Rio Negro seeking'

guerrillas.'

Furious at not finding any men, they pulled the women and children out of the huts and pushed them up the mountainside behind the village. They stopped on a ridge high above the village, turned on music, and forced some of the women to dance before raping them.

The terrified column then continued up to the top of the hill, where the women and children were divided into groups. Jesus Tecu was separated from his mother, who told him to look after his baby brother. The women were then strangled and beaten to death. One hundred and seven children were tied up and smashed against rocks while Jesus and 17 other youngsters lay on the ground. Jesus only survived because one of the killers decided to take him home as a servant. But he was not able to save his younger brother. His captor killed the baby with a machete before taking Jesus home.

Eighteen years later, the repercussions from this act of savagery are still spreading, like ripples in a pond. Next week, they will reach Washington DC, where they will help to feed a week of protests against the policies of the World Bank. How this has happened, and what it means, is the subject of this new series of 'On the Record'.

The Killing Fields of Guatemala

The March 13, 1982, massacre was one of five mass killings that occurred in the community of Rio Negro between 1980 and 1982. In all, 444 of the community's 791 inhabitants were killed. All were indigenous people from the Maya -- Achi, one of the 22 Mayan linguistic groups in Guatemala.

By the time of the Rio Negro massacres, the heartland of Guatemala was one of the great killing fields of the Cold War. The violence in Guatemala began in 1960, six years after the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) led a coup that overthrew the reformist government of Jacobo Arbenz. Outside Guatemala, the war was portrayed as a fight against 'leftist insurgents.' In fact, it was a campaign to militarize the entire society, to intimidate the indigenous population, and to expropriate ever more land and resources into the hands of a very small rich class. Today, three percent of the population owns over 65 percent of the arable land.

By the late 1970s, the Government of Guatemala had become a byword for repression. The Carter Administration suspended military aid in 1977, but South Africa, Taiwan and Israel all continued to supply the regime with arms and training. General Lucas Garcia was elected president in 1978, in an openly fraudulent election. The government was routinely condemned for gross abuses at the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva. U.N. reports painted a particularly bleak picture of cruelty against the indigenous people, who lived in the central highlands.

One of these indigenous communities, known as Rio Negro, lived along the banks 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 of which was privately owned. The rest was used by the whole community for pasture and firewood.

Carlos Chen and the others 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. Carlos describes it as a hard life, but good.

The Dam

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 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 was to be prominent in construction.

The first roads for the Chixoy project were cut 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.

Preparations for the dam were now well under way. 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. From the community's perspective, it was developed without consulting those affected. INDE officials descended on Rio Negro by helicopter, and told the villagers that their land was to be flooded. They would have to leave.

The arrival of the INDE helicopter looms large in the folklore of Rio Negro. Carlos Chen remembers how some angry villagers wanted to burn it, but calmer heads prevailed. The villagers appointed a committee, which negotiated with the INDE team and came up with a provisional agreement on a site for the resettled families. This was known as Pacux, next to the town of Rabinal. According to the survivors, INDE also agreed in writing to provide a package of eight components, including land and cement-block houses. Building began in Pacux.

Carlos Chen was one of those who took this plan around the families. He found that only 20 were prepared to take up the offer. These families moved to Pacux. According to Carlos, they found that after building a few cinderblock houses, INDE's contractors were now using wood, in a clear violation of the written agreement. Disgusted, the 20 families returned to their traditional land.

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.

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 angry villagers, who themselves began to remove objects for safe-keeping -- only to be accused of stealing by the French. To this day, no one has informed the community where the artifacts that were taken by the French team are kept. As a result, they are assumed to have been stolen or sold.

The Violence Begins

On March 4, 1980, the simmering feud erupted into open violence. Two young men from the community were accused of stealing beans from the Cogefar canteen and arrested by two soldiers who were employed by the project as security guards and a policeman. The two men were bound and taken to the village center. On the way, the trio arrested another villager and tied him up with his lasso.

Their arrival interrupted a heated community discussion in the village church about the dam and eviction. Angry words were exchanged and stones thrown. The three security men opened fire and killed seven villagers. In the melee that followed the three fled the village and tried to escape. One was hit by a machete and drowned trying to swim cross the river.

Four months later, on July 10, the Rio Negro community suffered another major blow when it lost its written record of the agreement with INDE and all the titles to its land to another act of violence. In response to a request by INDE two community leaders took the documentation to the dam site. Their broken, tortured bodies were discovered several days later. The community of Rio Negro had lost all proof of its compensation agreement with INDE, and its ownership of the houses. This critically important incident has never been investigated by the authorities.

The Civil Defense Patrols

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 wiping out existing villages as part of the army's scorched earth policy and replacing them with 'poles of development,' which contained groupings of 'model villages.' These model villages were more centrally located and under the strict control and observation of the military. The 'resettlement' community of Pacux was one such model village.

The goal was to empty the countryside and concentrate the displaced population nearer to the towns. Here they could not only be controlled by the military, but also constitute a pool of cheap labor. Large and small farm owners alike hired 'mozos,' or cheap workers, in conditions that began to look increasingly like slavery.

The second element of the new strategy was the creation of armed units in the communities. These were known as Civil Defense Patrols (PACs). Peter Lippman was told in Guatemala that the government planned to create PACs of at least 40 members in every community throughout

the country, but this proved completely impractical.

One PAC was created in Xococ, however, with the aggressive name of 'Combative Village of Xococ.' Some of the Xococ patrolmen joined under threat of death, but others jumped at the opportunity to own a gun and exercise some power. Carlos feels they also relished the chance to bully their neighbors in Rio Negro. Rio Negro and Xococ shared some ancestral land, but relations between the two villages were tense. In any event, the Xococ PAC was to become an instrument of terror, to be used against Rio Negro.

The introduction of the patrols poisoned community life in the highlands of Guatemala. As one report by the group Witness for Peace (WFP) put it: 'Terror became endemic and victims became victimizers. Neighbors denounced each other as subversives, the accusers hoping that such denunciations would exonerate them from the wide sweeping suspicion which left no one safe.' The patrolmen of Xococ turned their sights on the peaceful but stubborn villagers of Rio Negro. The stage was set for the massacres of 1982.

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. Carlos did not think it was worth the effort. Others were afraid. Seventy-four villagers made the journey, and 73 never returned. One terrified woman came rushing back to Rio Negro to announce that everyone was being killed. Carlos hurriedly consulted with his wife, and they decided that it would be safer if he and the remaining men fled for the hills. They were sure the women and children would not be harmed.

A month later, on March 13, they were proved terribly wrong when the vengeful patrolmen of Xococ arrived in Rio Negro and killed 177 women and children. Two months later, the army attacked and killed another 84 people at a place called 'Los Encuentros' in the Rio Negro valley. Fifteen women were taken off by helicopter, never to be seen again.

On September 14, 92 villagers were burned to death in a nearby community. The victims included 30 youngsters from Rio Negro who had survived the previous massacres.

Destruction of a Community

The community of Rio Negro had been completely destroyed. 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 along the valley, at Cahuinal, reemerges like a ghost every year when the water level falls. Each year it bears 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 lost its traditional structure of authority with the murder or flight of its village elders, Mayan priests, local politicians, catechists, and other church figures. In their place, authority shifted to the former patrolmen from Xococ, some of whom now lived in Pacux. They had been responsible for some of the most murderous acts, and their presence among their former victims was a symbol of impunity and a major obstacle to any recovery. It encouraged a culture of violence. Yet, as Annie Bird, from Rights Action puts it, they had now become role models for some of the young people in Pacux -- or, as she puts it, 'negative leaders.'

The Link Between the Dam and the Massacres

One key question is whether the villagers of Rio Negro were killed because they refused to move to make way for the Chixoy dam. If the link can be made, many feel that it implicates all those who supported the dam. This extends to the two multilateral development banks (World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank).

Carlos Chen has no doubt: 'If the Chixoy dam had not been built, then most of our community would be alive today,' he says. The timing is certainly highly suspect. Construction on the dam began in January 1983, almost immediately after the final massacre of 1982.

The World Bank was apparently aware that the Chixoy project had been surrounded by turmoil, but according to WFP, the Bank's project completion report (issued in 1991) appeared to put the blame on guerrilla activity. The problems associated with resettlement were 'due to the insurgency activity in the project area during the years 1980 to 1983.'

Five years later, in 1996, the Bank came to a more nuanced judgement. In response to the WFP report, a Bank mission was sent down to investigate the Chixoy controversy, and it concluded that 'neither the Bank nor other observers knew of the extent of the violence occurring in (Rio Negro).' The executive summary of the investigation also noted that 'there are still conflicting interpretations of the causes of the violence that occurred.'

There is little dispute that while there was some guerrilla activity in the Rabinal area, it was very low level compared to that of other departments, like Quiche, where armed resistance was strongest. One farmer from Rio Negro who was interviewed by Peter Lippman for this series last week, suggested that the area was used as a passage by guerrillas from other regions, but that even this started after the massacres of 1982:

'The army harassed us after the massacres too. I hid in the mountains for two years with my family. The guerrillas didn't hurt us, but when they passed through and attacked the army, then the army would accuse us of supporting the guerrillas. This was not true, but then the army killed women and children because of that, and burned our fields while we hid.'

Certainly, no one has offered a plausible explanation for the four massacres that were carried out in 1982 by Xococ civil patrolers, under the control and authority of the army. The clearest and most authoritative link between the construction of the dam and the massacres 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.

Some are uncomfortable at making too firm a connection between the Chixoy dam and the massacres. They note that dozens of other villages were destroyed as part of a scorched earth policy in the area, without any link to a dam. But the Rio Negro survivors are certainly convinced that if the Chixoy dam had not come to their river, their relatives would still be alive.

The Advocacy Corner

The following reports and organizations have been consulted for this series of 'On the Record'.

- 'A People Damned: The Impact of the World Bank Chixoy Hydroelectric project in Guatemala,' an excellent 1996 report from Witness for Peace (WFP), which has provided the starting point for subsequent investigations. The hard copy is currently out of print.
- 'The Chixoy Dam in Guatemala and the May Achi Genocide,' a March 1999 submission to the World Commission on Dams by the Reform the World Bank campaign (Italy) and 41 other Italian NGOs. (Email: Riforma-BM@cambio.it)
- 'Restitution for Communities Affected by Construction of Chixoy Dam' -- a March 2000 background note by Rights Action. (Email: info@rightsaction.org)
- 'Dams,' the official newsletter of the **World Commission on Dams**.
- World Rivers Review, the newsletter of the **International Rivers Network**.
- Report on Guatemala, from the Guatemala News and Information Bureau, in conjunction with the Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA). (email: nisgua@igc.org)
- The Guatemalan Verification Commission. At the request of the UN Office of Project Services (UNOPS), the **AAAS Science and Human Rights Program** has developed a CD-ROM version of the complete Spanish text report of the Commission for Historical Clarification. The conclusions are already available. The Commission's analysis of the Rio Negro massacre and its comments on the Chixoy dam can be found in illustrative case #10 (Volume 1, Annex 1). The report of the March 13, 1982, killing of children is illustrative case #14.

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