



On the Record: The Rio Negro Campaign

Issue 3: People of Rabinal, April 12, 2000

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From the Editorial Desk

In this issue, Peter Lippman visits Rabinal and talks to some of the community leaders who are fighting against impunity and striving to raise the morale and living standards of the former Rio Negro inhabitants. Like most of the Rio Negro survivors, they now live in Pacux, the resettlement site on the outskirts of Rabinal that was erected by INDE, the electrification company, after the construction of the Chixoy dam in 1983.

Peter began by meeting Jesus Tecu, one of only 18 survivors from the March 13, 1982, massacre. In 1994, with Carlos Chen, Jesus founded the Association of Widows, Widowers, Orphans, and Displaced of Rabinal Maya-Achi. The Association subsequently became ADIVIMA (Association for Development for the Victims of Violence in Maya Achi Verapaz). Today, ADIVIMA coordinates more than 20 communities affected by violence. In the second part of this issue, Peter will assess some of the difficulties that face ADIVIMA and its leaders.

Rabinal is a town of 10 to 15 blocks in width and length. An imposing but slightly dingy white cathedral dominates the center, with a plaza in front of it. The houses are one-story high, of brick, cinderblock, or mud-brick, with stucco covering the bricks, or falling off. Here and there lounges a dog, a cat, a chicken, or a turkey.

Only the several central streets are paved; the rest are dust generators. It seems to be the rule that as you descend from the highlands into a low valley, the climate changes and all is dry, all is dust. The Mayans say they are made of corn, and this I believe. But the astronomers say everything is created from dust, and this must be true also. Here in Rabinal, the universe is starting to come apart again.

Not much was happening in the town as I shambled through on a hot Saturday afternoon. Nothing was left for sale at the market except for some rancid french fries. I went to the legal clinic, or "Bufete Juridico Popular," to find Jesus Tecu. No one knew where the legal clinic was - not even the six men who were sitting in front of it. Finally I persuaded them to let me know where "Chus" (Jesus) was and took a cab out to Pacux.

I asked the taxi driver if there were any security problem around Rabinal. He said that the kids from Rabinal go into "Guatemala," as he called the capital, and learn bad ways there. He said,

"We're afraid to go there, too."

When we arrived, we asked some kids at the first corner where Jesus was, and they pointed behind us to a young man on a bicycle, wearing a baseball cap. I got out of the cab and met Jesus.

Jesus Tecu is a local organizer and survivor of one of the Rio Negro massacres, on March 13, 1982. On that date a large number of women and children of the village were taken into the hills and killed. They included most of Jesus' family. He was there with his little brother. As his mother was being taken away to be killed, she told him to take care of the baby. Soon the person who killed his family came back and said he was going to take Jesus home to work for him, but the baby was too young. So he killed Jesus' brother with a machete and took Jesus home.

Jesus worked for him as a slave for two years. Eighteen young people survived the massacre like Jesus, but some did not survive the ensuing period of forced work. Eventually, Jesus escaped with help from his sister and was released to a relative. The displaced people of Rio Negro ended up in Pacux, a new neighborhood of shacks built outside of the small town of Rabinal. Pacux was the equivalent of a "strategic hamlets" implemented by the US government during the Vietnam War. In Guatemala they were called "model villages." In other words, it was a place to keep the indigenous people under control, and where they were compelled to supply cheap labor to the landowners.

Fear of assassination, torture, and disappearance forced the people of Rio Negro, now in Pacux, to keep their mouths shut for a long time. But things calmed down somewhat in the late 1980s, and several people emerged as leaders. Jesus was one. In 1993, he was over the age of 20 and able to file a request for the exhumation of the mass grave where his family was killed. Out of dozens of corpses unearthed, a few were positively identified. This, together with Jesus' eyewitness testimony, provided the concrete evidence necessary for a trial of three Civilian Defense Patrol (PAC) commanders who had led the slaughter.

The fact that Jesus was willing to risk his life to bring these people to trial made a huge difference to the other survivors, not only of the Rio Negro massacres, but of dozens of other atrocities that had happened in the area.

It was too late in the day to start interviewing, but Jesus walked me back to the town, wheeling his bike in front of him. He is 27 years old and about 5'3" in height. He led me through the cemetery on the way back, as it was cooler, because of the trees. Also, it was relatively free of the dust picked up by every passing car on the dirt road. Almost as an afterthought, Jesus directed my attention to a couple of monuments in the graveyard. One, about 10 feet tall, had colorful naïve paintings of the March 13 massacre. It depicted paramilitaries and soldiers wielding machetes and guns leading the women and children up a hill, then dead people lying on top of the hill, and mothers and babies hanging from a cross. A few words told the story of the massacre.

This is part of what the people of Rio Negro are fighting for: to "recover the memory." It is, in effect, the opposite of denial. Originally a small monument was built there, and someone quickly

destroyed it. So they built two larger ones in its place. But there are many "secret" gravesites and only a few monuments, to date. The people need to know where the remains of their loved ones are, so that they can bring this story to a close.

Jesus pointed out to me a long mound in the ground, perhaps 50 feet long, stretching away from the monument. This is where the exhumed remains of the victims were reburied, presumably including his mother.

We walked the rest of the way into town. A girl of about ten was driving six or eight head of cattle outwards with a short stick. I wondered how one little human could manage such big animals. Some local women came our way, resplendent in their huipiles (embroidered and/or woven blouses.) They smiled at Jesus. Ahead of us the cathedral was glowing in the setting sun, and people were tearing down their stalls at the market. We ran into Cristobal Osorio Sanchez, another man from Rio Negro, who is the president of the Pacux development committee. About 40, wearing a leather cowboy hat and riding a bicycle, he spoke Achi (the language of the Rio Negro people and most of the other indigenous people around here) with Jesus, and we all arranged to meet up in Pacux the next day.

Back at the hotel I spent the evening talking to a woman from Guatemala City who was in Rabinal to take a census of widows and orphans for the university. She told me of the street children of the capital, who sniff paint thinner because they don't know what else to do. Some of these teenagers have babies, and they have them sniff thinner too, to keep them quiet.

In my room I read the "human rights" section in my Rough Guide. I tried to think about what it would feel like to be hacked up by a machete.

The next day I sat in the sun on the steps of the cathedral watching people set up their stalls, watching folks come in from the surrounding villages. Lantana and bougainvillea bloomed among the stalls. High mountains ringed the town, only a few miles away. I tried to take the whole scene in, slowly.

The men were in jeans and plain shirts, most of them wearing cowboy hats of leather or straw, some with baseball caps, many with machetes in hand-tooled leather sheathes. The women are short and colorful in their huipiles and cortes, the standard Guatemalan hand-woven material from the western highlands, that nearly all the women and girls in the market were wearing. They have a special way of wrapping the cloth so that it has two pleats in the front, and they tie it with a hand-woven belt. Most of the women and girls wore painted wooden or glass beads; some wore a cross, and many wore drilled silver coins. Roosevelt dimes are popular for this. The older women wear elaborate head-scarves, folded in special ways to both keep out the sun and balance a basket or other load. If a colorful hand-woven piece of cloth is not handy, a camouflage-pattern towel will do.

People sat around the edges of the market grabbing a snack, a mother nursing a baby. Scruffy little dusty dogs waited for scraps. A man led in a small horse carrying 40-odd melons and unloaded them in front of me. A young man came by on a bike, carrying a baby in the front basket. Neither of them wore a helmet. The back of his t-shirt read, "Citizens Commission on

Human Rights," with a telephone number.

Besides all kinds of local fruit and vegetables, here you could buy cassettes, clothing, straw hats, woven cloth, plastic buckets of many colors, ices, cinnamon, ropes, and hammocks. You could get a shoeshine. You could drink gloppy pink or white "atol" out of a yellow and red hand-painted bowl, carved from a gourd. I opted for a "licuado," kind of a fruit smoothie.

Nearby in the plaza a band tuned up -- a guitar, drum, synthesizer, and vocalist who was endearingly never in tune with himself or anyone else. "Jesucristo ya vieeeeeeneee...." They are friendly people, who always smile and wave, "buenos dias," if you happen to make eye contact.

The next day Jesus spoke to me for two hours as we sat leaning against the cinderblock community center in the shade. He told me of the broken promises of INDE, the government's electrical agency that was supposed to give restitution for the land now under water. The list of grievances went on and on. Work is scarce in Rabinal. Some people work in factories or as construction laborers or farmhands, but only receive 15 to 20 Quetzales a day (\$2.00-\$2.50), and work is never steady. This is poverty. You can see it, and you can smell it. The kids are not getting enough to eat. This is why they end up in the city, sniffing thinner and washing car windows.

Later in the morning, I rode with Jesus in a crowded truck to take eight women to Salama, to the municipal "Ministry of the Public." He was helping the women file a request for an exhumation. These were people from another village that had suffered a massacre 18 years ago. They know the site of the mass grave and want it dug up. Since the first exhumation in 1993, there have been over 50 around the country, but only six or so in Rabinal.

Each of the women had to submit a declaration of what they knew. They were not nervous, even though they are faced with stonewalling and discrimination by the ministry. Jesus described the process as a "moral restitution."

In the evening I met the gringos -- Kathy Dill, an anthropology doctoral field-worker from the United States, and a couple from Belgium who were working in a cultural development program for the Mayans. The Belgians told me that there is a "Mayan movement," a kind of cultural re-awakening among the indigenous population, but that it is not very strong in this area, in the eastern highlands.

We discussed Rabinal municipality, and why it is so poor. It doesn't help that the poor roads make it unattractive for investment. The land is not very good, either. There are no big farms. People who want to build a factory will do it somewhere where they can buy and sell -- which means, not in Rabinal. The main export from the area is people.

I had heard a lot of disturbing information about splits in the communities, and Kathy was able to help me understand this. It did not help at all that people in the communities were forced to join the PACs ("Civil Defense Patrols") and kill each other, sometimes their own close friends and relatives. These people are still around, and some of them, the leaders of the PACs, justify their actions. They threaten the activists, as the consequence of the activism would be their

punishment.

Jealousy, "envidia," is another part of the problem, as Kathy explained. People don't have much of anything. They have rotting wooden houses. So when they see that the leaders have full-time paying jobs and can afford "block" houses (solid houses built from cinderblocks), they are susceptible to believing rumors that the ex-paramilitaries spread about the leaders profiting off their activism.

It would be hard to pin a profiteering accusation on Jesus. He was the recipient of the "Reebok Human Rights Award" in 1996. This is an award that is given to human rights activists under the age of 30 in various countries. Jesus was taken on tour to some eastern cities of the United States in 1998 and then received a prize of \$25,000, an unimaginable treasure in the villages of Guatemala. He put this money into a plot of land for ADIVIMA, and a foundation that currently supports 14 local students. Jesus wears the same worn-out clothing as everyone else and lives in the same kind of shabby shack as the other survivors. The only difference is that the front of his house is painted blue.

Talking to Kathy reminded me that the story of activism is always complicated. There is always dissent, possibility for opportunism, and much hinges on a few self-sacrificing personalities.

Also, racism is a major factor, as Kathy pointed out. What I am seeing here is the concrete manifestation of racism. It is a huge problem, not only in the government that wants to exterminate the indigenous people, but also among the "Ladinos" (the name for the Latino/mestizo, Spanish-speaking population), who want to help the Mayans. Kathy accused them of being condescending, careerist, and manipulative.

Later I walked through town to try to look up Pedrina Burrero Lopez another activist and leader of ADIVIMA. On the way, I heard music, and the reverberation of the drumming told me that it was live music. This kind of thing always interrupts what I'm doing. I turned a corner to see what was happening. In front of a house/storefront there was a small crowd. A little pickup truck was full of white lilies. This could have been a wedding, but not on Monday.

Soon I saw activity in a garage that was part of the store, and loud brass music was coming from there. I went closer and saw that some men were slowly carrying a coffin out of the garage. They would take several very slow steps forward, and then a couple backward. The band, three trumpets, two baritones, a tuba, and a bass drum, were playing a beautiful slow, solemn air. They were remarkably in tune.

I heard screaming mixed with the music. When the coffin was finally all the way out of the garage, I saw a woman dressed in black, probably the widow, who was screaming and carrying on behind the coffin. Another woman in black was holding her up. This demonstration seemed to me to be part of a mourning ritual. The clothing advertisements and painting of Daffy Duck chasing Bugs Bunny were not in harmony with the situation.

The coffin was carried with the head a little higher than the feet. The pallbearers made a 360-degree turn in front of the garage and then headed down the street toward the cathedral. I went

the other way.

Pedrina is another leader of ADIVIMA . She is not from Rio Negro, but from another village, Nimacabaj, that suffered massacres. Pedrina lost most of the rest of her relatives, but her two children survived. Her husband was taken away one day and "disappeared." Pedrina lived on the south coast for several years after the "violencia," as they call it. This is relatively rich place where people from the highlands periodically go to make a little money.

Pedrina learned Spanish there. She worked cutting sugar cane and coffee, "like a man," as she said. (I have cut cane, and it's the hardest work I've ever done.) Pedrina returned to her village near Rabinal in the early 1990s. Around the time of the first exhumations, she and Carlos helped to start the Association of widows and orphans that eventually became ADIVIMA . More than ten years after the massacres, the survivors were finally finding their voice. ADIVIMA helps them request exhumations, file complaints against war criminals, organize demonstrations, call for memorial monuments, observe anniversary commemorations, and other things that end the silence and empower the struggle for people's rights.

This struggle goes on, and success is still far away. Only one trial has been held in Rabinal, and that case is still on appeal. There are still very real threats. Some people tried to kidnap Pedrina late last year, but her family was around to protect her. Later, someone shot in front of her house, hitting her son in the foot. In spite of all this, Pedrina goes on. She is friendly and good-natured in her corte and huipil, and proved easy to interview. She gave me information without my having to struggle to find out what is important.

Pedrina is only 35 years old. She told me that it is common among her people for the women to marry between the ages of 15 and 18. She is a grandmother.

Later I returned to Pacux and found Cristobal Osorio Sanchez, who is president of the local improvement committee of Pacux. We sat in front of his house as he told me of his history and work. A couple of kids watched me curiously, one of them examining my cheap suede shoes, which probably cost what someone here could earn in two months.

I asked Cristobal how many relatives he had lost in the massacres. He counted in Spanish, "Uno, dos, tres..." , thinking about each individual. It seemed to take forever, until he arrived at a figure of 28 people. Cristobal told me that he had left Rio Negro early the morning of the massacre to pick some corn. As he was returning, he met someone who told him what had happened. He dropped the corn and ran into the hills.

Cristobal no longer had a wife. He lived in the woods for two years, with other refugees, eating roots and whatever they could find. If they lit a fire at night, the army would come after them. A lot of people hid like this, some for as much as five years. Some of the oldest and youngest died of the hardship.

Cristobal told me this story and said, "It is very hard for us to talk about this. We have a lot of pain and sadness in our hearts." He later remarried and has four children now. As we spoke, his wife stayed inside. He is a modest man, like all of the local people I have met, and Kathy says

that everyone in Pacux likes him. They elected him president of the local Committee for Improvement. He works to get INDE's promises of restitution fulfilled, to organize labor on the new "finca" in Alta Verapaz that was given to the Rio Negro survivors, and to develop that land. It's an uphill struggle.

I made an arrangement with Cristobal for him to find me someone to take me the next day to see the dam that flooded Rio Negro. When I found out I was leaving Rabinal, I decided I liked the place. The surrounding mountains are good, but especially I liked the poor but beautiful, dignified people. There was never a nervous moment there, in spite of all the admonitions. No one so much as looked at me sideways.

Talking to Kathy, I found out that the place blooms in the rainy season. When it pours in June and July, the corn shoots up suddenly until you can't see the houses.

The Advocacy Corner

Organizers for change in the municipality of Rabinal face daunting obstacles. Fear, mistrust, racism, manipulation, and lack of education all conspire to thwart attempts to correct past abuses. But persistence on the part of some determined activists has, over time, made headway. In this second part of his profile of the people of Rabinal, Peter Lippman looks at some of the challenges that they face.

The Challenge of Organizing in Rabinal

In early 1994 Carlos Chen, Pedrina, and Jesus Tecu founded the Association of Widows, Widowers, Orphans, and Displaced of Rabinal Maya-Achi, (Coordinadora de Viudas, Viudos, Huerfanos y Desplazados Rabinal Maya-Achi), which later became ADIVIMA .

ADIVIMA became the central coordinating organization in Rabinal municipality in the campaign against impunity. It files requests for exhumations, presses charges against war criminals, calls regular demonstrations, and erects monuments in memory of the victims.

All of these actions opened new possibilities in the mid-1990s. According to American anthropologist Kathy Dill, a long-time student of the Rabinal struggle, 800 people joined ADIVIMA after 1994. "This was a euphoric time, because of the opening of the political space, which they call 'breaking the silence,' " she said.

Pedrina Burrero Lopez, one of the original founding members, described the work of ADIVIMA . "At that time, this was a kind of testing of the ability to press charges against the people who committed the crimes. Our work is to press for the respect of human rights, to prevent a return to the way things were during the war. Together with the families of the victims, we are informing the Ministry of the Public about the mass graves. We are pressing charges and working to create monuments in commemoration of the victims, to tell the story of what happened, recording the names of the communities and the victims. We have also organized demonstrations."

"Through the work of this organization, people have defeated their fear, because we went to the communities to talk about what happened, and that there was not justice. Then, people began to

discuss more openly what had happened, and they joined us in our work. Because of this, they felt that they were not alone. Now they are not only talking about what happened before but are filing complaints about new threats as well."

Although Rio Negro is the most prominent case, ADIVIMA represents over 20 communities in Rabinal. ADIVIMA has found support from within the community, as well as from national and international organizations.

The local Guatemalan church was an early supporter of the drive for exhumations and the prosecution of war criminals. The prominent human rights group GAM (Group of Mutual Support) helped. Rights Action used its base in Washington and an office in Guatemala City, to support ADIVIMA in Rabinal and bring activists on speaking tours abroad. The award to Jesus Tecu from Reebok for human rights activism was critical in setting up a foundation to support local students. And the presence of UN monitors from MINUGUA, the UN Mission in Guatemala, was also reassuring.

ADIVIMA has branched out into development work. The organization manages a carpentry shop on its property, currently employing a master carpenter and two apprentices. Pedrina was proud of this enterprise. The shop creates and sells furniture in the municipality and hopes to hire more people when it expands its market. ADIVIMA also distributes fertilizer to 20 communities in the area.

A further endeavor of ADIVIMA is the creation of a museum. This is part of the drive to create what Rolando Alecio, an anthropologist, calls a "collective memory." Four activists including Pedrina and Carlos spent a month in Oaxaca, Mexico, to learn how to organize a museum, to catalogue items, and to collect oral histories.

"We have exhibits on the culture and the traditions of our people, the craftwork (artesanía), carved and painted bowls, and huipiles," said Pedrina. "There is also a section about human rights. We have photographs from an exhumation, and books about the Rio Negro massacre in English and Spanish. We are preserving some photographs that survived of Rio Negro and its people from before the war. There are not a lot of items, but we have the most important things." The museum was displayed in the church for a month and is now awaiting reconstruction of a more permanent space.

In 1999 Rights Action assisted ADIVIMA in setting up a legal clinic, the "Bufete Jurídico Popular." The Bufete staff lawyers who are qualified to help local people in filing requests with the district court, press charges, file complaints about intimidation, or straighten out property disputes. Jesus is a full-time employee of the Bufete and spends his days driving villagers to Salama (the municipal seat of Rabinal), guiding them through the procedures, and translating from Achi, the local indigenous language, to Spanish for them.

Pedrina described one project of the Bufete: "The Bufete is helping people file charges against the criminals and is helping displaced people with property problems. We are advising people how to return to their communities. Right now, for example, there are around 200 people who were displaced from Laguna and Hacienda villages, living in Rabinal, Nimacabaj, and

Palimunix. They have no money, work, or homes. They are in a worse position than the people of Rio Negro. We are working to get the government to buy land for these people, but they haven't given us a yes or no answer yet."

Another important local organization that collaborates with ADIVIMA is the Comité de Promejoramiento (Development Committee) Rio Negro y Pacux. Pacux is the settlement that INDE built to house the survivors of Rio Negro when they were displaced. This organization represents the displaced citizens of Rio Negro, now mostly living in Pacux, in their efforts to receive more of the restitution that was promised them by INDE when the dam that displaced them was constructed.

The president of the committee, Cristobal Osorio Sanchez, recalled the formation of the committee, after the massacres and the dispersion of the Rio Negro community: "President Rios Montt declared an amnesty. At this time, many of the people came to military bases and turned themselves in. They 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.

"Eventually, we formed a local development committee (Comité de Promejoramiento). Some of our people were in Pacux, but the government did not want to give the houses to the people of Rio Negro at that time, because they were still accusing us of having supported the guerrillas. The members of the committee were threatened but continued to put pressure on the government to give us the houses. We received them in 1983.

"However INDE, or the government through INDE, denied some of our people rights to houses. Some of these were widows or orphans whose head of the family had died. After much pressure on our part, the government eventually gave these people houses. But there are still over 40 families whose rights to restitution have not been recognized by INDE, and they are living in houses with other families."

"Seven persons constituted the new representative development committee, or Comité Promejoramiento, for the people of Rio Negro/Pacux. We instituted various campaigns, including one on the radio. In this way we criticized the actions of the government and INDE."

The promises of INDE were largely unfulfilled, and the committee has a long list of complaints. They were promised housing that was equal or better to the houses lost. They were also promised land. But they were given shacks and inferior land. Recently some better land was finally donated, but Cristobal says it is insufficient for the population and far away.

This will be described in more detail in another article, but it is enough to illustrate that the Rio Negro Improvement Committee has full-time work advocating for its community.

While ADIVIMA and its associated organizations persevere in their work against impunity, they are still working in an atmosphere of mistrust, fear, and potential violence.

Openings for action have been created, but the legacy of the war remains. Kathy Dill described the dynamics of mistrust: "ADIVIMA is trying to function in the site of a genocide. A common

phrase here is the 'destruction of social fabric.' There has been a destruction of logic and of understanding of how to create smoothly functioning relationships. So now there is an idea that everything is black and white: you are either with the military, or with the guerrillas."

"In that context, there is still a high number of people who cannot think past their own local experiences. Most of the population that is over 30 is illiterate. Most of the men know a little Spanish, and most of the women know none. Few can read. So when you ask who raped and killed people, they'll say that the soldiers and the PACs and judiciales did it. But when you ask whose fault it was, then they'll say that it was the guerrillas' fault.

"Then if you ask, 'Why was it the guerrilla's fault? Did they kill?' They will say, 'No, because they brought down repression on us, by talking about human rights and so on.' The political framework of such people does not include the context of regional politics."

Rolando Alecio, who runs a group that provides support for traumatized war victims from Guatemala City, said: "The army would hire or compel one community to kill another. The pretext would often be a petty argument about land ownership, control of a source of water, or other power conflicts. So now, when people ask for restitution, it revives these old conflicts. Not everyone in the community is in ADIVIMA and other activist organizations. Some of them participated in the crimes. These people have been threatening the activists and spreading rumors about them, saying that Carlos has become a millionaire, and similar things."

The divisiveness described here by Rolando Alecio and Kathy Dill manifests itself in the spreading of rumors and threats, and in occasional intimidation and violence. Although the Rio Negro case is the only one in the municipality that has been brought to trial to date, the former PAC members have everything to lose if the activists' work succeeds. Consequently, these people spend a lot of time harassing the activists.

In only the last couple of years, there was an attempt to kidnap Pedrina, her seven-year-old son was shot, and someone shot at Carlos Chen Osorio. Recently a threat was passed to the residents of Pacux that "we will come back and finish what we started in 1982."

Pedrina had the following to say of these threats and incidents: "The people who were involved in the crimes don't like us because we are bringing to light information about what happened. The former PAC members are doing these things. They are from the communities of Xococ and Vegas de Santo Domingo. Those who are doing these things have no conscience. They have gotten used to killing."

Envy plays a part in spreading rumors. Some activists receive payment from a nongovernmental organization for their work and are able to travel. This has opened the door to accusations that they are making a profit from the suffering of the community. Jesus and Carlos have both been accused this way.

But Jesus plays down the description of disunity in Pacux. He said, "ADIVIMA has the trust of the people. There are former soldiers who have made threats, but in Pacux this only amounts to around ten people." Cristobal Osorio, president of the Pacux development committee, asserted,

"There is unity in Pacux. The problems are only with five families. Some of those people are saying that Jesus has profited from the violence, because he won that award. But these are people who don't want to help the community."

The years of violence have left scars. Rolando Alecio described people who had seen relatives killed 18 years earlier, who still complain of headaches for 15 years. Another person says her "heart hurts." Like the community leaders themselves, Rolando feels that the main obstacle to their healing is impunity.

This continues to be an uphill struggle. Kathy Dill feels that the activists of Rabinal are facing a brick wall. For all their work, fewer than ten exhumations have been performed. Only one trial has been held, and that is still on appeal. "People are still malnourished," she said. "They have no money to send their children to school, and they still need to fix their homes." The resulting frustration adds fuel to the divisiveness.

Another source of frustration is the indifference and downright racism of the court system. Officials of the court do not speak Achi, and there are rarely sufficient translators to make sure people know what is going on during a procedure. Further, complainants must endure tedious and costly processes. When I accompanied Jesus as he was taking a group of people to court to file an exhumation request, the procedure took most of the day.

Pedrina told me, "We have informed the authorities about 35 mass graves to this date. But they have delayed, or ignored us. The only concrete result so far has been in the Rio Negro case, because there were survivors who testified. In some other cases, there were witnesses, but they have been ignored."

Jesus said, "Now, almost no one is in jail because of the atrocities -- only the commanders from the Rio Negro massacre. Making trials happen is difficult because there is much discrimination in the courts. So the indigenous people do not want to go file complaints, because they feel very threatened."

Kathy Dill evaluated the primary obstacles to combating impunity: lack of education, lack of resources, lack of understanding of how to connect with available resources and manipulate the system, and racism. She called for more outside help for Rabinal: "Educated people who could come in and understand the situation and help get things done. They would do things like write proposals for financial assistance and raise money."

Rights Action, which has been the most consistent international supporter of the Rio Negro survivors, goes further and argues that impunity cannot be eradicated solely at the local level, without necessary changes at the national and international level. According to Rights Action, the Chixoy dam shows that this should extend to restructuring of the global economy.

In Guatemala itself, the community leaders know that the struggle is far from over. For Pedrina Burrero, the results of the recent elections were a blow. Efraim Rios Montt, one of the most atrocious rulers during the war, was elected president of the Guatemalan Congress. "We are more afraid now that we were before, because of the new FRG [Republican Front of Guatemala]

government with Rios Montt. He was in power during the worst violence and was responsible for killing many people. The people who are making intimidation hope that Rios Montt will authorize new massacres; they're happy that he won the election."

The new mayor of Rabinal, Lucas Tecu, is of this same brand. During the war, he was commander of all the PACs in the municipality. Pedrina said, "These things are intimidating to us, but we have to continue our work, so that we don't return to the things that happened before."

None of the activists I spoke with showed any sign of slowing down their efforts. There is scarcely any alternative, after all. Pedrina told me, "Almost all of the villages around here are full of people who feel the same way. This is why we are struggling. We must continue our work." For more information about ADIVIMA's work in Guatemala, contact: Rights Action, 1830 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Washington DC, 20009, tel: 202-783-1123, email: info@rightsaction.org