



On the Record: The Rio Negro Campaign

Issue 6: Communities Struggle for Justice in Guatemala, July 12, 2000

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From the Editorial Desk

In 1982, 440 inhabitants from the community of Rio Negro in the Guatemalan department of Rabinal were killed in four separate massacres by the Guatemalan army and civil patrollers from neighboring villages. Earlier this year, the Advocacy Project ran a series of 'On the Record' (OTR) about the efforts of the survivors to win reparations from the World Bank.

The Rio Negro survivors claimed that they had been killed because they had refused to abandon their homes to make way for a large dam that was built at Chixoy on the Rio Negro. They held the World Bank partly responsible because the Bank had provided financing for the dam.

This April, a leader of the Rio Negro survivors, Carlos Chen, came to Washington to press his case at the World Bank. Carlos was sponsored by Rights Action, which has funded a wide range of community projects in Rabinal and jointly sponsored the series of OTR.

We produced five issues on Carlos and the World Bank's link to Rio Negro. We were pleased to hear that this material was evidently read with great care at the Bank -- it was on the desk of senior World Bank officials when they met with Carlos. We also understand that the Rio Negro issue is now once again under active consideration by the Bank -- several years after the Bank terminated its official involvement in the project.

We are happy to have helped Carlos and his courageous friends to make their case. We appreciate the letter from our other partner, Rights Action, which is reprinted below.

Carlos Chen's visit to Washington has already produced one remarkable postscript. Dominga Sic Ruiz was nine years old when her family was massacred at Rio Negro. She was smuggled out of the danger zone and ended up in the United States where she lived for the next 18 years as Denese Becker.

As Denese, she heard about Carlos Chen's work during his visit to America and contacted Rights Action. Earlier this month, she traveled back to Guatemala to where she had lived. Her visit was

widely covered in the press. Readers can find her comments at the press conference below.

Dominga's dramatic reappearance is a testament to the lobbying skills of Rights Action and Carlos Chen. But it is important to keep up the momentum where it matters -- in Guatemala itself.

The Advocacy Project will continue to follow and support Carlos' brave campaign. We will be discussing concrete projects with Rights Action in September.

After concluding his written dispatches from Rabinal, our principal writer, Peter Lippman, spent a week in Guatemala on a study tour organized by the Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA). The final three issues of this series contain Peter's reports on the week-long tour. His coverage starts with a profile of NISGUA, below.

The articles start from the same premise as Peter's profiles of Rio Negro -- namely that peace in Guatemala cannot be imposed: it has to emerge from the communities. In these remaining issues Peter broadens out from Rabinal. He finds that throughout the country, hundreds of communities are struggling with the same poverty, isolation, and anger that he found in Rio Negro.

The key question is whether the new government of President Alfonso Portillo is interested in changing this. Will Portillo encourage and nurture local efforts to pull communities out of the mire, or will he ignore and stifle such initiatives?

At first sights, the prospects seem poor. Portillo is a partner in government with the fearsome Efraim Rios Montt, who presided over Guatemala at the time of the 1982 massacres in Rio Negro, and who still wields considerable power in the country.

But Portillo also has a capacity to surprise. He exudes a modernist style and has made some of the right noises. He has also already made some powerful enemies, to judge from the fact that he recently sent his family out of the country, out of concern that they might be kidnapped. In the next issue (No. 7), Peter looks at this chimera of a presidency and reflects on what it could mean for community-based activism.

Issue No. 8 contains an account of the NISGUA visit to one of the Communities of Population in Resistance (CPRs). These are communities of people who were displaced during the height of the war in the early 1980s and have been fighting for their rights ever since. The 1996 peace accords required that their needs be met, but the NISGUA delegation found these people are virtually forgotten and badly in need of services.

The final issue in this series (No. 9) profiles SITRABI, the union of Guatemalan banana workers. Founded in 1947, SITRABI is the oldest union in Guatemala and the strongest in the private sector. But it also faces constant harassment and intimidation. Last year, after SITRABI called a strike, armed thugs surrounded the union hall, kidnapped the union leaders, and threatened to 'hang them in the park and light them on fire.' The leaders fled in fear for their lives.

SITRABI's unionists and Carlos Chen's activists are both fighting for justice in Guatemala. Both are fighting impunity. Both face danger and intimidation on a daily basis. They, and many other activists for justice, need support and understanding from friends outside if they are to pull through and if Guatemala is to recover from over 30 years of dictatorship and state-sponsored violence.

Carlos Chen at the World Bank: A Letter from Rights Action

Dear friends,

I write as follow-up to your series: 'Guatemala's indigenous communities seek reparations for two decades of murder and impoverishment.' Thank you for doing this great work.

What happened before, during, and after the Chixoy Dam project [funded by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) to the tune of \$290,000,000] has been rarely reported on, and almost never in the detail and breadth with which you gave it coverage.

One of the 'highlights' of Carlos' spring six-week speaking tour in the United States and Canada were private meetings with the World Bank and the IDB. Yet, I shouldn't call them highlights; rather, they were 'achievements.' Getting a first meeting with the IDB and re-initiating meetings with the World Bank, concerning the devastating impact of the Chixoy Dam project, were the result of years of activism and pressure.

While there is much work to be done, it is safe to conclude that but for the activism of Carlos and his colleagues in Rabinal, and the activism of groups like our own, Witness for Peace and the International Rivers Network, neither of the banks would have 're-visited' the Chixoy Dam project on their own.

This project was by most measures a failure, one that led to the brutal deaths of over 400 Achi people from Rio Negro and the complete destruction of their home community. Since that time, no person and no institution has been held accountable for what happened.

During two-hour meetings with both banks, Carlos was able to recount the full story of what actually happened, from 1976 (when the Rio Negro community first learned that this dam project would be imposed on them and they would be forced to move) through to late 1982, after the fourth brutal massacres wiped out the community.

Carlos was able to explain that since that time most survivors have lived in conditions of endemic poverty, still suffering the psychological trauma of the massacres. And Carlos was able to set out, in studied detail, the extent of all that was lost to the Chixoy Dam project, including what was stolen from them by the soldiers and civil defense patrollers. He clearly set out how little the survivors had received by way of 'compensation.'

During the meetings, no official from either bank questioned Carlos' account. There seems to be general acceptance of the great suffering caused. However, neither bank was willing, in these initial meetings, to accept any responsibility for what happened. Most of the 15 officials from

both banks that we spoke with argued that their banks knew little or nothing of what happened, until the 1996 publication of the Witness for Peace report 'A People Dammed.' While it makes sense that these more recent bank employees may have known nothing about all that went wrong with the Chixoy Dam project, we find their claims to an institutional lack of knowledge to be disingenuous.

At this point, Carlos is not disappointed (certainly not surprised) that the two banks would not accept a part of the responsibility for what went wrong with the project and the related repression. We made clear to the banks that we saw these meetings as the beginning of a process (hopefully short, but possibly long) to get full and proper compensation and reparations for the surviving victims of the Chixoy Dam project.

Carlos has gone home. He will spend some time with his family and then give a full report to the people of Rio Negro. They will soon write a follow-up letter to both banks to set out the next steps that they hope will be taken.

Meanwhile, our organizations will write our own follow-up letters to the banks, setting out our initial conclusions and making concrete petitions.

As these are private negotiations, I will leave it at that, for now. Again, I thank the Advocacy Project for choosing to cover this issue. I encourage your readers to contact us if they are interested in supporting this reparations campaign, or if they have suggestions as to how we can strengthen our position and work.

Sincerely,
Grahame Russell, Executive Director, Rights Action.

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Washington DC, 20009, USA. Tel: 202-783-1123. Fax: 202-483-6730. Email:
info@rightsaction.org

Dominga Goes Home

The following statement was issued by Denese Becker, nee Dominga Sic Ruiz, at a press conference in Guatemala City on June 13, 2000.

'My name is Denese Becker. I am an American citizen visiting my family in Guatemala. On October 8th, 1972, I was born in the village of Rio Negro, county of Rabinal, in the province of Baja Verapaz. My mother, Magdalena Lajuj Ruiz, and my father, Rosendo Sic, named me Dominga Sic Ruiz.

In 1982, Guatemalan army soldiers and civil patrollers from the neighboring village of Xococ assassinated my parents. On February 13, my father, along with 72 other men from Rio Negro, was assassinated and buried in a clandestine grave in the village of Xococ. One month later, on the March 13, Guatemalan army soldiers and civil patrollers from Xococ entered my village. My mother, along with 176 women and children, died that day. I survived the massacre by escaping into the woods where I hid with other survivors. My infant sister died in the mountains. I was 9

and a half years old.

After many months of trying to survive in the woods, I was smuggled down the mountain and placed in the care of a nun in the town of Rabinal. From there, I was taken to an orphanage in Guatemala City. One year later, an American family adopted me. Today I live in Iowa with my husband Blane and our two sons.

My first years in the United States were very difficult; I had been torn away from everything that was familiar to me. Gradually, I adjusted to my new life, but always secretly longed to return to Guatemala, even though I did not know what I would find, or if any of my relatives had survived. Meanwhile, here in Guatemala, my surviving family members had been told various stories about where I was. They believed that I was in Costa Rica.

Last year, with the support of my North American family, I planned my trip to Guatemala. Just a few weeks before coming, I discovered that I do have relatives here and that they were very anxious to see me. When I arrived in Rabinal, I was met by a large group of people, including my aunts, uncles, and many cousins. We spent last week getting to know one another and learning about each other's lives since the violence.

I have been asked what I had hoped to accomplish with this visit. I came to Guatemala because I am looking for family; I want to learn about my past; I am seeking peace in my heart; and I'm looking for my heritage for the sake of my children.

During this trip I have found that my family and the rest of the survivors of the Rio Negro community face many serious problems. Many wrongs have been committed against us as a people, and we continue to suffer the consequences of those actions.

What I remember about Rio Negro -- a fertile river valley, plenty of food, a normal family life -- no longer exists. I have seen the terrible conditions in which my relatives live today and this has motivated me to publicly state the following:

--I want to help in the struggle to get fair compensation for the losses suffered during the violence, especially our land. --I want to help my family get out of the extreme poverty in which they live. --I want to help them with their struggle for justice.

But these goals cannot be achieved without financial and legal help. I know that there are institutions that could and should fulfill legal and moral obligations toward my community.

FIRST: I am not an expert on international banking politics. However, it has been well documented that the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank funded the Chixoy Dam project, which destroyed my village. Despite the fact that military violence was used to extinguish local resistance to the loss of our lands, these international institutions continued financing the project.

Last February, INDE, the government-owned electric company responsible for the Chixoy Dam project, declared itself legally immune to any further reparation negotiations with the

community. Two decades after being forcibly removed from our lands, the Rio Negro community has still not received fair compensation for losses.

Today, I am publicly imploring the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank to take responsibility for their negligence--to fund the projects that my community needs to escape the extreme poverty in which they live. I am asking them to help my people reconstruct their lives -- lives that were destroyed by the Chixoy Dam project and state violence.

SECOND: As part of the Peace Accords, the Guatemalan government has promised to conduct a nationwide war reparation project. The beneficiaries of this project are to be the victims of human rights violations committed during the armed conflict. Last month, the Association for the Integral Development of the Victims of the Violence in the Verapaces (ADIVIMA) submitted a report to SEPAZ on the impact of state violence on Maya Achi communities in Rabinal. I urge the Guatemalan government to fulfill their commitment to compensate the victims of human rights violations.

THIRD: I request the closure of the military base that is located beside the community of Pacux and which continues to intimidate survivors of the violence and is in violation of the Peace Accords.

FOURTH: Due to evidence presented during the Rio Negro trial, the sentencing tribunal determined that nine other ex-patrollers from Xococ, and an official of the Guatemalan army should be investigated in connection with the massacre. I would like to urge the Ministerio Publico to act on this court order.

I also believe that justice should be done for those who planned and ordered the killings of my family and for this I support my community in their efforts to prosecute the military high command.

The remains of my father and the other men that were massacred with him on February 13, 1982, still lie in a clandestine grave in Xococ. It is my understanding that this grave has been illegally tampered with on several occasions. It is also my understanding that one such incident led to the 1994 arrest of the ex-civil patrollers from Xococ. These men were later tried and convicted for a different crime -- the March 13 massacre of the women and children of Rio Negro.

I want to know why the Ministerio Publico did not move immediately to have the tampered-with grave exhumed. Why has this clandestine grave been left unprotected from those who want to destroy evidence of crimes?

I urge the Ministerio Publico to do everything possible to expedite the exhumation of the clandestine grave located in Xococ in which lie the victims of the February 12, 1982 massacre. Like other survivors, I would like to bury my father with dignity.

Thank you.

Denese Becker

If you would like more information about the story of 'Denese and Dominga' and the Chixoy Dam, or if you have suggestions for projects that might benefit survivors of the massacres, contact: **Rights Action** (formerly Guatemala Partners), 1830 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Washington, DC, 20009, USA. Tel: 202-783-1123. Fax: 202-483-6730. Email: [**info@rightsaction.org**](mailto:info@rightsaction.org)

The story of Dominga was posted by: Guatemala News and Information Bureau (GNIB), 3181 Mission Street Box 12, San Francisco, CA, 94110, Tel./fax: 415-826-3593 Email: [**gnib@igc.org**](mailto:gnib@igc.org)

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NISGUA: A Profile of a North American Solidarity Organization

by Peter Lippman

The interest of North American liberals in foreign events tends to rise and fall in proportion to the news coverage of a given issue. Thus the Middle East peace and justice movement was most active during the Intifada, and the Central America solidarity movement was strongest during the 1980s, when there were wars in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala all at the same time.

However, the Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA) has remained active for the last 20 years, beginning when the war in Guatemala was at its height. Although the war has ended, and the Latin American political scene has changed dramatically, NISGUA continues to support struggling activists of Guatemala.

Based in Washington DC, NISGUA's work in support of justice in Guatemala takes many forms. At home, it performs educational work, grassroots organizing, fundraising, and lobbying. NISGUA recently took over the function of coordinating the Guatemala Accompaniment Project. The organization sends delegations to Guatemala annually to meet with community activists and study ways of supporting their work. It also brings Guatemalan activists on tour to the United States.

NISGUA's goal is to support Guatemalans working for socioeconomic justice, democratization, human rights, and demilitarization. To these ends it works to influence the US administration's policies toward Guatemala and to mobilize grassroots action in the United States. NISGUA also cultivates people-to-people ties between the United States and Guatemala.

NISGUA is concerned with the struggle to further the implementation of the 1996 peace accords and, as its statement of campaign goals reads, 'to support the process towards true self-determination and justice in Guatemala.' These broad aims dictate that NISGUA support the fight against impunity and promote judicial reform, demilitarization of civil society, and greater respect for human rights. NISGUA also presses the Guatemalan government to provide

reparations to the victims of the war.

Given these aims, NISGUA works strategically to inform North Americans of crucial issues in Guatemala and to make it easier for concerned citizens to be heard by their representatives. Because of the close involvement of the US government in Central American affairs throughout the last century, our administration has both the ability and the responsibility to exert its influence for the good of the Guatemalan people.

Activities of NISGUA

Following are the primary ways in which NISGUA works to achieve its goals:

--The Grassroots Guatemala Project: This project identifies a set of appropriate grassroots organizations in Guatemala with which to collaborate. These are labor, women's, indigenous, campesino, and human rights organizations, such as CONIC (National Coordinating Body of Campesino and Indigenous Organizations). NISGUA stays informed about their campaigns and facilitates their building stronger strategic relationships with their North American counterparts and with possible U.S.-based funders. Through Grassroots Guatemala, NISGUA also provides material aid to organizations that will benefit from small- and medium-sized grants.

--Tours: Each year NISGUA brings a group of speakers to the United States in the fall. Last October activists toured different regions of the country and spoke on the theme of 'Democracy from the Grassroots Up.' Speakers represented the following organizations: CONDEG (National Council of Displaced Persons of Guatemala), the Women's Sector of the Civil Society Assembly, Defensoria Maya (an indigenous human rights organization), and COPMAGUA (Coordinating Body of the Mayan People of Guatemala). These delegates toured the country for several weeks, educating North American communities and raising funds that were channeled back into Guatemala via the Grassroots Guatemala Project.

--Delegations: NISGUA organizes an annual delegation of North American activists who spend a week in Guatemala meeting representatives of grassroots organizations. This April a delegation of ten visited Guatemala City, Xela (Quetzaltenango), and a resettled Community of Population in Resistance (CPR) near Retalhuleu. For a week the group met with over a dozen organizations representing most sectors of the movement for social justice in Guatemala: indigenous, campesino, labor, human rights, and women's organizations.

Besides the CPR, the delegation also visited a squatter community of displaced persons on the outskirts of the capital.

Toward the end of the tour, the delegation met with US Ambassador to Guatemala Prudence Bushnell and discussed what it had heard about impunity, labor problems, and demilitarization in the previous week. While there was a very full schedule, the members of the delegation got along well, and there were even some moments of entertainment. Members returned to the United States inspired to share what they had learned and to continue to support their colleagues in Guatemala.

A similar delegation will be organized in the spring of next year. NISGUA also prepared a

delegation in collaboration with the women's labor solidarity organization STITCH. In early July this week-long women's delegation participated in Spanish classes for half a day and then met with Guatemalan women activists and labor organizers the rest of each day.

--Legislative work: One of the most important areas of NISGUA's work is its issues-based grassroots lobbying. Usually, NISGUA sends out an 'action alert' to a network of community organizations and activists who have expressed the desire to be kept informed.

For example, military aid to Guatemala has been under consideration by Congress for several months. Guatemala's human rights record means that the Guatemalan army does not receive military aid from the United States in the form of what is known as international military education and training (IMET).

Ambassador Bushnell told NISGUA that in her opinion, this should be reconsidered only when the Guatemalan army admits its part in the war atrocities, but there is no sign of this taking place any time soon. On May 9, a Senate subcommittee voted to maintain the ban. The issue then came up in the House of Representatives, where it was discussed in the context of the Foreign Operations bill. Once again NISGUA and other solidarity groups lobbied hard and helped to ensure that the ban was maintained. It means that Guatemala can receive training in democracy building but not military training.

On occasion, a member of the House of Representatives will pass around a Congressional sign-on letter asking other representatives to sign. On Guatemala issues, NISGUA often drafts this letter. The letter may be directed to the President of Guatemala, asking him to implement the peace accords and abide by the recommendations of the Truth Commission. NISGUA will then notify its network to contact the appropriate representative, requesting him or her to sign on to this letter.

NISGUA's policy on such issues is determined through a process that draws on a coalition of organizations from around the United States. A lobbying organization named the Latin American Working Group (LAWG) takes recommendations from regional or country subgroups. Because of its grassroots contacts, NISGUA plays a leadership role in the Guatemala subgroup of the LAWG.

NISGUA's Emergency Response Network (ERN) is an effective way for busy people to react to human rights violations in Guatemala. When NISGUA is pressing a particular issue, it activates the ERN by sending individual messages to the appropriate Guatemalan official in the name of people who have subscribed to the service. Then the subscriber will receive a newsletter describing the issue, and a translation of the letter that has been sent in the name of the subscriber.

In addition to these lobbying techniques, NISGUA prepares two regular publications: the bi-monthly 'Solidarity Update,' which carries news about Guatemala and the Guatemalan solidarity movement in the United States, and 'Report on Guatemala,' a quarterly magazine of news and analysis.

Another important issue presently under consideration is the joint Guatemalan-US military exercise, 'Maya Jaguar.' This is a nine-day, \$2 million operation to train and support the drug interdiction unit of the Guatemalan National Police. The exercises are to involve US helicopters and Coast Guard cruisers, and 40 US troops providing logistical support. NISGUA opposes this maneuver on the grounds that it is a roundabout sort of military aid. Also, there is no Congressional oversight on this matter, as the support comes directly from the Pentagon, so there is no chance for US citizens to voice their opinion on the action. Furthermore, Guatemalan gangsters who are involved in drug-running in the eastern part of the country are said to have close ties to the military.

--Accompaniment: As of the beginning of this year, NISGUA has adopted the Guatemala Accompaniment Project (GAP). This project accompanies groups of refugees that have returned from Mexico, as well as internally displaced groups that have come out of hiding. Such groups often need accompaniment to safeguard them from attack. It is a way of developing solidarity between Guatemalan and North American communities.

'Accompaniers' monitor the human rights situation of the community and report to their sponsoring organization or community in the United States. They act as a link between the two communities, channeling support for the Guatemalan community, and providing on-the-ground information to North American activists so that they can better understand the people they are trying to assist.

Coordinated by program organizer Heather Dean, GAP supports two volunteers in Guatemala and maintains between eight and 14 accompaniers at any given time. GAP was founded in 1995 and now facilitates 14 community partnerships.

Recently, NISGUA decided to respond to a petition for accompaniment from communities testifying in genocide proceedings brought against former dictator Lucas Garcia in the Guatemalan court system. These legal proceedings are historic: they are a unique example of genocide charges launched while the accused is still alive, in the domestic court-system of the country in which the genocide took place. Ten communities that suffered under the genocidal policies carried out by the Guatemalan military government in the early 1980s are courageously stepping forward to provide testimony. Already, they have faced harassment as a result and have requested international accompaniment urgently. Using the many years of experience gathered through the GAP program, NISGUA is able to send a first such genocide-case accompanier to Guatemala this autumn.

Through these programs, NISGUA continues to support the struggle for social justice in Guatemala. In addition to the issues mentioned above, the organization has concerned itself with many others over the past few years, including lobbying to solve the murder of Bishop Gerardi and working to support the beleaguered banana workers' union in the eastern part of the country. For more information contact NISGUA at NISGUA@igc.org, or call 202 518-7638.

What You Can Do:

1. Get informed by subscribing to NISGUA publications (Solidarity Update - bimonthly, and Report on Guatemala).

--Visit **NISGUA's** website.

--Visit the **Latin America Working Group** (LAWG) website.

2. Join NISGUA's Emergency Response Network: NISGUA sends messages in subscribers' names directly to people in Guatemala who have the greatest impact on the situation. Subscribers are then informed of the case.

3. Help to organize a speaker event this fall. For a full speaking program, visit NISGUA's website. For an organizing package, contact Amy Johnson, national organizer, at 202-518-7638.

4. Urge your representative vote to maintain the ban on military aid to Guatemala. To contact your members of Congress, call the US Capitol switchboard: 202-224-3121. Or look up your members of Congress on the Internet on the **US House** and **Senate website**.