



## *On the Record: The Rio Negro Campaign*

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### **From the Editorial Desk**

In the story of Rio Negro we saw massacre, flight to the mountains, resettlement, and broken promises. An examination of other displaced communities in Guatemala reveals that hundreds share Rio Negro's history. The problems of the Rio Negro survivors are universal.

Thirty-six years of war separated people from their land and concentrated that land in the hands of a small number of rich landholders. Marcos Rodriguez of CONIC (National Coordinating Body for Indigenous and Campesino Organizations) said, "The land has been monopolized. There was much repression. A landowner would come and bribe the army, and then the army would come and throw people off the land. They would say, 'This land belongs to that landowner. You didn't know it, but now you are going to know it. Get off.'"

Between five and six million impoverished, landless campesinos (peasants) -- half of Guatemala's population -- can attest to the fact that this process continues today by other means. But grassroots organizations are struggling to improve the living conditions of Guatemala's landless. Among those leading the struggle are the CPRs (Communities of Population in Resistance). 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.

### **History of the CPRs**

During the war, the Guatemalan army and paramilitaries destroyed hundreds of villages on the pretext that their inhabitants were supporting guerrilla forces. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, thousands of villagers began to flee without waiting for the army to arrive. Over one million Guatemalans were displaced in this way. Many people fled to the cities, and at least 200,000 ended up in Mexico and other countries. But many chose to stay in Guatemala at all costs and

fled deep into the mountains, like the Rio Negro survivors.

In some parts of Guatemala, the number of people hiding in the mountains was so high that new communities were formed, and a kind of social organization took place. Thousands needed to be fed, and a security system had to be organized to alert people to the army's continuing helicopter and ground attacks.

Three secret, semi-nomadic communities developed -- one in El Peten, and two in the western highlands. They called themselves Communities of Population in Resistance, signifying the fact that, while they were not of the guerrilla forces, they refused to submit to the army's command to leave their homelands and resettle in 'model communities.'

In Quiche department, thousands of people fled north to the mountains from the area known as the Ixil Triangle, between the three municipalities of Nebaj, Chajul, and Cotzal. This new grouping of people called itself CPR Sierra. CPR Sierra was mainly composed of Quiche and Ixil Mayans who had traditionally supported themselves as subsistence farmers. From the early 1980s until 1994, they lived a version of underground life in the woods, chased and blockaded by the army.

The cost for this resistance was high. Around half of those who fled died from hunger, disease, and attacks by the army. To ensure mobility, it was necessary for people to limit the size of their encampments to between 25 and 30 families. Over time an infrastructure with elected leaders evolved, to help people survive and avoid detection. This infrastructure looked after the communities' security, health, education, and communication needs.

For sustenance, the communities planted corn and beans in the mountains. But the army would target these crops, bombing them from helicopters. So to augment their food supply, people planted native plants that blended in with the surroundings better. Traditional curanderos (healers) and 'health promoters' trained in modern medicine looked after people's health. School classes were held in Mayan languages and Spanish, and adult literacy courses were offered. For security purposes, underground shelters were established, together with havens in towns and cities where small numbers of people could hide for a short time.

The villagers of CPR Sierra spent as much as 14 years hiding in the mountains, under attack, living just to survive. In 1990 CPR Sierra made its existence public by placing an announcement in a Guatemala City newspaper, demanding recognition from the government and calling for negotiations. The CPRs were incorporated into the peace process in the next few years. When the peace accords were signed in late 1996, they included provisions for land for the CPRs.

### **Land: The Time Bomb**

As the war wound down in the mid-1990s, the people of Guatemala were confronted with formidable land problems that have continued to this day. Over 400 villages had been destroyed. Land that had been owned by one family was expropriated by a large landowner or by a private company. In this way disputes over titles became widespread. The National Land Commission (CONTIERRA) recently announced that over 600 land titles are currently the subject of dispute.

The NISGUA delegation that visited Guatemala in April was told that so many land titles were 'overlapping' that if all the tracts of land were placed side by side, they would cover all of Central America. You would not know this from the pathetically small amount of taxes paid by the large landowners. In fact, the under-assessment of land is a serious problem, because it leaves the government with insufficient funds to solve the land shortage. Now, as the government tries to purchase land to resettle displaced communities, owners sense their advantage and raise their prices sky-high.

Marcos Rodriguez of CONIC said, 'The land fund was supposed to help people have land. There was Q300 million (\$40.5 million) to buy land. But now there is no money. People who monopolized the land raised the prices. For 15 caballerias (1665 acres) they want Q18 to 20 million. And they are selling bad land. This, after having declared for tax purposes that it was worth Q20,000 to Q30,000.'

The 1996 peace accords provided for a partial solution. The first step is to create a land registry, which would help to sort out conflicting land ownership claims. This project has begun, with significant support from the World Bank. However, while the land registry is an important first step, it will not solve the shortage of land. Furthermore, it is expected to require at least ten years, just to make a list of land titles. Litigation to settle ownership disputes could take much longer, and that still will not put land in the hands of all the campesinos who need to support themselves.

One way to provide land for the dispossessed campesinos is for the 'social investment funds' to buy it, or to lend the funds for it. The peace accords set up several funds for this purpose, supported through international grants. Where resettlement of the CPRs is concerned, these purchases are generally partial loans. As families become re-established on a plot of land, within several years they must begin paying into a revolving fund, to be used for further development.

The land funds, however, have been subject to much misuse and controversy. For example, a land fund named FOGUAVI (Fondo Guatemalteco para Viviendas) was supposed to subsidize low-income housing, but the subsidies were misused. The developers that built houses sold them to middle-class families, and enriched themselves in that way. The developers and the banks thus benefited from this fund, but the displaced and jobless people did not.

Another development fund, the National Fund for Peace (FONAPAZ), was recently denounced for failing to tend to the most urgent needs of the internally displaced people in Alta Verapaz. More than a year ago, several settlements were promised roofing to cover homes for over 250 families. But FONAPAZ has not been able to come through with the material.

FONATIERRA is yet another disappointing land fund, established to provide credit to campesinos. But FONATIERRA has failed to come up with sufficient funds to support significant land purchases. In a criticism of this organization, Rafael Gonzalez, coordinator of CUC (Campesino Unity Committee) declared, 'The lack of land is a time bomb waiting to explode, and it should be deactivated through the efficient functioning of institutions such as FONATIERRA.'

In spite of the lack of support, some communities have managed to resettle, in varying degrees. But when a farm is acquired for a CPR, or a community returns from Mexico, or when squatters gain title to their neighborhood, often this is the last they will hear from the government. The new Rio Negro farm at Sahomax, where there is not even a chainsaw to cut timber, is an example. And many struggling, newly resettled communities are only able to cultivate one crop a year when they should be able to grow two, because they lack irrigation equipment.

Further, it is still the case that many communities remain unsettled. Some groups have moved onto land that belonged to them before the war, only to be told that someone else now has the title to it. Other communities have squatted on the outskirts of Guatemala City and have been struggling since the end of the war for title to the land they occupy. Often there seems to be no solution in sight.

In Chiquimula, for example, 25 families were relocated last fall because their former neighborhood of Barrio Nuevo was falling into a widening crevice. They ended up sleeping in a school for most of the season. In Mixco near Guatemala City, Mayor Elmer Morales proposed that 115 families that have been living there for 11 years pay over \$3,000 each for the title to lots that they already bought. Violent evictions are not unusual; at least 12 have been carried out since President Portillo came into office. The National Civil Police and Special Forces performed some of these evictions; private security guards hired by landowners performed others.

As if the struggle to resettle were not hard enough, often people who fled to the mountains without their possessions are unable to find employment in their place of refuge, because they lack identification documents. When they return to their municipalities of origin to renew their documents, it happens that local authorities will refuse to recognize them, out of fear that these people will try to reclaim their original homes.

### **CPRs Since the War**

Upon the signing of the peace accords, the people of CPR Sierra set out to establish new communities in the face of these daunting obstacles. As mentioned above, the Guatemalan government had committed itself to acquiring land for resettlement. CPR Sierra pressed for one large settlement near the original home area of its members, but this proved impossible. Part of the problem was that most of the land owned by CPR members before the war had been usurped by others. Land of quality was hard to find in any case and expensive to purchase.

When the CPRs were offered land in the south, some of the members agreed. They were attracted by the fact that the land was accessible by road, while many farms in the north were only accessible by foot or airplane. They disregarded the fact that the climate, terrain, and agriculture in the south differ greatly from those in the north, and that firewood and the herbs they were accustomed to were in short supply in the south.

By 1998, several land purchases had been made, splitting up the surviving 15,000 members into communities as far afield as the southern coastal region. One large parcel of land, 'El Tesoro,' was provided for 450 families in Uspantan, near their place of origin. Over 60 percent of CPR Sierra's families moved to two farms, 'El Triunfo' and 'Maryland,' near the south coast. A few families managed to return to their pre-war homes, and several hundred more families remained

in the high mountains, waiting for a resolution to their problem.

Although the war was over, at times the resettled communities were insecure. The leaders of CPR Sierra requested international accompaniment, which had been mentioned in the peace accords. International organizations that had supplied 'accompaniers' during the war now expanded their role to provide North Americans and Europeans who would live in a resettled community for several months or a year. The presence of a 'gringo' observer helps to prevent violent incidents and provides a communication link to solidarity and relief organizations abroad.

### **A Visit to El Triunfo**

In April of this year the NISGUA delegation that was visiting Guatemala traveled to the southern coastal region to look at the resettled CPR community of El Triunfo. After a short lunch in Retalhuleu, we headed 45 minutes down a dirt road to the community.

As we entered the community we saw shelters, not quite houses, with corrugated metal roofing (lamina) and weathered plastic sheeting for walls, all supported by 4x4 posts. Children rode bikes down the dirt roads, and there were a couple of plank shacks where drinks and groceries were sold. We parked and met Diego, a leader of the community development committee. Diego was wearing a tee shirt that read, 'I think I'm having stress,' with a picture of a zebra whose stripes were falling off.

El Triunfo moved into this settlement in September 1998. The community was given emergency roofing, and a main road is being constructed. There is a supply of potable water from a well that has an electric pump. Stoves were donated by FIS, one of the 'social investment funds.' A housing construction project is being funded by Oxfam but has run out of money for the time being. Temporary bamboo walls are planned for the unfinished houses.

Each family has a temporary shelter with its own water spigot. Some have washtubs. There are no ditches or gutters to control the rainwater. The primary school and the community meeting center are structures with posts and lamina, with no walls. This is tolerable during the summer but does not work during the rainy season. No solution is in sight for the school at this time, since resources are being concentrated on the houses.

We ate lunch and went to the community center. The ten of us visitors sat in a semi-circle and the community leaders sat down with us. They took turns addressing us and telling us about the conditions of the settlement.

A few dozen other local folks stood by listening and observing: men, women, kids on bicycles, and assorted pets and poultry. The local people wore sandals or rubber boots, straw hats, and baseball caps. The auxiliary mayor, Dionisio, wore a brown shirt and a white sombrero.

They told us, 'As CPRs we had an agreement with the Arzu government, regarding provision of land. This has been partially fulfilled. We are still waiting for assistance with the houses, health center, and school. Now that the government has changed, we are concerned. We hope that the government's policies will change so that we can have some help, but we are worried. There was an agreement on compensation, but we have received nothing from that. We were supposed to

receive restitution for our lost possessions and for the harvests that were lost.

'We are the survivors of many massacres. After the repression, there were a high number of widows and orphans. There is no direct support for them. We need to get back what we have lost. We need to pressure the government to get assistance for those people who have been living a marginal existence. The basic price of goods has gone up, including the price of gas.

'The government has not responded to requests for assistance. The school and health center are under-supported. The streets are not improved. All problems are more difficult in the rainy season. Then, the entire area is either mud or it is under water. Representatives of the community requested assistance three months ago, but there has been no response. The government furnished the land and some food, but nothing else. President Portillo has promised much but not delivered.

'We are only able to have one harvest a year, because it is very dry in the summer. We plant in May and harvest in September and October. If we had irrigation, we could develop more. We need everything: roads, houses, water, and electricity. We only received stoves and food from the government, and only enough roofing material for 15 roofs. If international organizations want to help us, they should give support directly to us, as the EU has done, rather than giving via the government.'

After meeting with the community representatives, we took a walk through the settlement, inspecting the school, the roads, and the half-built houses. The school is a stark example of pervasive neglect from the government. We were told, 'In our school, we have 420 students, with about 15 education promoters (uncertified teachers whom the government has promised to certify). The Ministry of Education has offered no help. There was talk of a free breakfast program, but nothing came of it. This school is an emergency program, but not administered by the government.

'The teachers are local people. They are elected by us. The Ministry of Education was supposed to give us money for our schools, but last year the teachers had to wait eight months for their pay. That will probably happen again this year. Our school needs supplies, food, and salaries for the teachers.'

While life in El Triunfo is primitive, some of the basics of a health infrastructure exist. There is no electricity, but each home lot has potable water and a concrete outhouse with a composting toilet. The residents have been taught how to manage the composting process. The community has a health clinic on the outskirts of the settlement, staffed by health promoters and midwives. During a recent cholera outbreak in the surrounding area, the settlement remained free of this disease.

However, the clinic is another example of neglect; health problems are abundant and medical supplies are scarce. The people of El Triunfo are subject to diseases such as malaria and dengue fever, which were for the most part unfamiliar to them when they lived in the highlands.

The people of El Triunfo live on decent land and own the titles to it. This is an important

improvement in their situation, compared to the way they lived for most of the 1980s and 1990s. But, besides the lack of development resources, other conditions are difficult. The temperature is much higher than they are accustomed to, and there has been more sickness. The NISGUA delegation was told that in the mountains people had been able to grow everything they needed and only bought soap and salt. Here, they plant corn and beans but have to buy many things. To augment their income they work on the nearby farms.

The CPR is not without political organization. It has two permanent representatives in the capital. There is also a general coordinating body, composed of representatives from each of six CPR settlements. These people bring information back to their communities. Finally, there is a board that represents the community, composed of people who visit the capital occasionally to make decisions regarding development projects.

### **Difficult Transfer**

The resettled survivors of CPR Sierra struggle along against discouraging challenges -- some living under better conditions than others. While El Triunfo goes into the rainy season with half-built houses, the former inhabitants of nearby 'Maryland' are adapting to a new setting. Maryland was settled in the summer of 1998, only to be destroyed by Hurricane Mitch that fall. The community of 200 families languished until this winter, until they were able to move onto 'El Tesorito' farm.

More recently, a third group of former CPR members moved from Quiche department in mid-April to a farm named El Salvador, in Chimaltenango department. This land was provided by the government, which then refused to supply transportation out of the highlands. The remaining funds were arranged by the solidarity/relief organization Denver Justice and Peace Committee/CAMINOS, with the American Friends Service Committee.

Around 300 families were supposed to join this community, but at present fewer than 100 have made the move. This points up a serious problem with the transfer from the cool highlands to the sweltering coastal area. Many families, and sometimes individual family members, simply refuse to attempt to adjust to the change in climate and terrain. They either stay in the highlands under impoverished conditions, or else return there. At El Triunfo there were supposed to be 350 families, but now there are only around 300.

Among those who have remained in the Ixil Triangle, conditions are at least as difficult. Some are still struggling to regain titles to pre-war holdings around Chajul, but they face resistance both from private usurpers and from companies that have taken over their land. And while El Tesoro at Uspantan is a decent cardamom plantation, lack of road access means that its inhabitants are condemned to living by subsistence farming.

### **Forgotten Settlements**

A North American activist who has been working to support the CPRs for many years told me, 'People [in the resettled CPR communities] are basically working to rise to the same level of suffering as the rest of Guatemala.' This unhappy assessment is probably an accurate reflection of the general condition of the CPR survivors. This condition is the result, first, of decades of

atrocious mistreatment by the government, and more recently, broken promises.

The Guatemalan government is required by the 1996 Peace Accords to work to solve the land problems of the CPR survivors, as well as of all the displaced and dispossessed of Guatemala. Mechanisms were created to take care of these problems, but three years of corruption and neglect under the Arzu government stalled their resolution. The resettled CPR members are now watching the new government with much skepticism.

Land has been procured (under loans, not grants) for most of the CPR members. But the infrastructure was promised and forgotten. In this way, the resettled CPRs greatly resemble Pacux, the settlement of Rio Negro survivors described in the earlier series of *On the Record*. Schools are poor, understaffed, and under-equipped; teachers are paid late if ever. Clinics are under-equipped, and the health of the population suffers. Desperately needed irrigation equipment is lacking.

Marcos Rodriguez told the NISGUA delegation, 'In the summer, the water is wasted. In nine or ten years there may be a drought. There needs to be more training, education to take care of the land. We must develop proposals for agrarian reform, to take care of the debt/default problem. There is no policy on how to resolve the land problem. There is no real agrarian policy. We have to talk about forgiving debts.'

These problems are the same throughout Guatemala: for the CPR survivors and other resettled communities, for the Rio Negro survivors, and for those lucky souls who never even lost their land. The Rio Negro survivors have received more international attention than have the CPRs. The same is probably true of the returned refugee communities from Mexico. But in the case of the Rio Negro survivors, this has not even served to bring their 'level of suffering' up to that of the CPRs!

Truly, all the displaced of Guatemala are in the same boat, and significant change will require the international community to concentrate attention on the Guatemalan government to pressure it to live up to its promises, reform the tax system, reform the social funds, and implement the peace agreement. Concerned activists have their work cut out for them.

As this OTR goes out, the Advocacy Project has learned that a leader of El Triunfo was assassinated on June 27, 2000. The body of Ambricio Lopez Aguilar, 51 years old, was found riddled with bullets in a field near the settlement. At this point, we have no further details of the crime, but it is a disturbing example of the violent incidents that have been on the rise since the NISGUA delegation's visit to Guatemala.

From Iain's Diary

We all took a stroll and looked at the school, built the same way as the town meeting-place -- open spaces with no walls. When the rains come, this will be difficult. We walked up the long central road to the water tank, with about 30 kids and grown-ups accompanying us. As it was getting dark a boy of about seven came up to me and put his hand in mine. We walked that way quietly for a while, and then I picked him up and put him on my shoulders.



For dinner I ended up at the 'home' of a middle-aged woman who was cooking and holding a baby on her back, wrapped up in a shawl that she had woven herself. Her name was Maria, as was her daughter-in-law, who sat tending another baby. The younger Maria's husband was off at work, and Maria the elder had no husband. The baby she was tending was a grandchild.

I sat on a stool over the dirt floor while Maria shuffled pots on a large wood-fire stove, constructed from bricks. A chicken wandered in and out, then a dog. Nearby was a cinderblock outhouse and a tap with running water. I sat there in the dark as she cooked.

Maria was not very talkative. I did not want to ask her where her husband was. She told me that she and her family had run from her village during the war, without clothes, without dishes. They were in the hills for 14 years. She said, 'The government sent soldiers to kill the people. The army came and bombed us all day with helicopters. Now it is better.'

Other than the dim light from the stove's fire, the only light was from a thin yellow tapered candle standing on the stove, a little bent, without a holder. I thought about the Chixoy Dam that had been built at such great cost to electrify Guatemala. The candle tipped over and went out. As Maria picked it up and re-lit it in the fire, she asked me, 'Hay luces en su pais?' (Are there lights in your country?)

I asked Maria what she knew about my country. Had she ever heard of California, New York, Washington DC? No. For that matter, she had never been to Guatemala City or Quetzaltenango. She told me they didn't have money for that. She asked me how the land was in my country. Are there herbs to eat? I told her that most people had homes and that almost everyone had electricity and a car. (April 5, 2000)

### **The Advocacy Corner**

What You Can Do:

1. Learn more about the CPRs and other displaced communities of Guatemala. Check out the website of the **Denver Justice and Peace Committee** (DJPC)/CAMINOS.

2. Visit Guatemala on an upcoming delegation:

--DJPC-Witness for Peace organizes regular delegations to Guatemala: the most recent looked at Economic Injustice and Guatemala's Compromised Peace (July 11-25, 2000). It catered mainly to those between the ages of 16 and 25. Cost: \$1,000 (half scholarships available). The itinerary included a visit to El Tesorito, visits with maquila and banana plantation workers, and interactive learning on the political, economic, and human rights issues affecting Guatemala. Organized jointly with Witness for Peace. For more information, call DJPC at 303-623-1463.

3. Be an accompanier: contact the Denver Justice and Peace Committee at 303-623-1463, or (email) [denjustpeace@juno.com](mailto:denjustpeace@juno.com). Also, check the Guatemala Accompaniment Project web page on the **NISGUA** website.