

10-1-2012

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Recommended Citation

The Chixoy Dam: A Time for Justice, PEACE AND FREEDOM MAGAZINE (Fall 2012).

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The Chixoy Dam: A Time for Justice

By Lauren Carasik



The year 1982 was a tragically bloody time in the remote village of Rio Negro, in the Guatemalan highlands. In four separate massacres, over 400 innocent people were savagely murdered by the Guatemalan military and paramilitary forces.

These unspeakable atrocities occurred in the context of widespread violence in Guatemala (from 1975-1985) including four regions in which the United Nations concluded that the Guatemalan government committed genocide. The indigenous Maya Achi people of Rio Negro were specifically targeted in order to clear the path for an international development project that precipitated the violence and wholly failed to meet one of its centrally stated goals: alleviating poverty in the local communities.

The village of Rio Negro, along with 32 other communities, was slated for destruction for the construction of the Chixoy Dam, a development project funded by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. Some villages up and down river from the proposed dam site reluctantly complied with orders to vacate, while others were less amenable to being forcibly displaced from their ancestral homes.

The inhabitants of Rio Negro were unwilling to trade their way of life for the poorly conceptualized resettlement community of Pacux, a gritty neighborhood on the outskirts of a town called Rabinal. Pacux was located far from their beloved river and without consistent access to potable water. It was also a day's hike from their once thriving and close-knit community. Impatient with the resistance of the village, the military silenced the peaceful opposition through the murder of

men, women and children.

On one particularly brutal day, March 13, 1982, some 177 women and children were bound together and marched up a steep hill to the clearing at Pacoxom, a beautiful setting with a panoramic view of the idyllic valley below. After separating out a few children to be enslaved by the paramilitary forces that would help kill their families, the remaining women and children were slaughtered without mercy. On the 30th anniversary of the March 13 massacre, I attended a moving ceremony to honor and remember the dead at the massacre site. The community's anguish was palpable, co-existing with the hope and the resistance of a people determined to uncover truth, preserve memory and demand justice.

With unparalleled tenacity and courage, survivors of these massacres have labored tirelessly to ensure that their loved ones are not forgotten and that their ancestral lands are restored. Despite unrelenting threats, intrepid leaders Carlos Chen and Carlos Tecu Osario have demanded accountability and reparations for the atrocities committed against their people. Three decades have passed, yet the massacre survivors and those displaced from neighboring villages have seen only empty promises – none have been made whole for the harms inflicted on their communities, their lands and their spirits.

On June 19th and 20th of this year, the Inter American Court of Human Rights held a hearing in the case of Rio Negro survivors against the state of Guatemala, which



"Do not forget" (*No Olvidamos*) says the poster at the commemorative site, and painted messages such as this one on the side of the building keep the memory of the destruction of the town and its inhabitants alive.



Carlos Chen, left, whose pregnant wife and two children were murdered, and Carlos Tecu Osario who witnessed the massacre and was subsequently enslaved, are two who lead the demands for accountability and justice.

— Author Photo

has yet to release money necessary to allow survivors to rebuild their communities and heal from the unspeakable harms they have suffered.

Advocates continue to wage a battle against the impunity of the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. The fight is being waged through the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, despite the

Commission's summary rejection of their petition. An appeal is currently under review. The case against the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank sets an important precedent for the accountability of international organizations, especially those whose stated mission is to alleviate poverty. International human rights standards should be applicable to *all* international institutions. We need to send the message that no one is above the rule of law.

The atrocities in Guatemala are not just a Guatemalan problem, and they demand an international solution. The U.S. has had bloody hands in Guatemala dating back before the 1954 coup that ousted the democratically elected president Jacobo Arbenz. Multilateral development institutions that funded the Chixoy Dam (despite widespread reports of egregious human rights abuses in the region) also bear some responsibility for the carnage that ensued. The member states of these institutions should not escape accountability.

Impunity cannot be allowed to prevail. The state of Guatemala and international organizations must be held to account for the violence perpetrated against the Maya Achi villagers. The courageous survivors deserve swift and full justice: reparations must be paid to foster healing and promote justice without further delay. For more information, please see <http://www.rightsaction.org>.

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Thirty years later, an altar at the massacre site is one way survivors keep alive the memory of the 400 people killed at Rio Negro. — Author photo

12 STEPS FOR TAKING ACTION TO END HUMAN TRAFFICKING

1. Contact your Senator and demand the immediate passage of S. Bill 1301 the "Trafficking Victims Prevention Reauthorization Act of 2011." This is the most recent reauthorization of TVPA.
2. Educate yourself, so that you can better educate others! see www.polarisproject.org or www.sharedhoped.org to learn more about this complex problem.
3. Advocate for better resources and training for child welfare agencies. Tell your Congressperson to pass H.R. Bill 2730 the "Strengthening the Child Welfare Response to Trafficking Act."
4. Write to your local, state, and federal-level representatives and ask them to argue both for better human trafficking trainings for police and other government employees and for better services for victims.
5. Buy slavery-free goods at www.madebysurvivors.com. These products are made by major anti-trafficking organizations around the world.
6. Ask your representative to vote yes for H.R. Bill 2795 the "Business Transparency on Trafficking and Slavery Act," which requires large companies to report the measures they take to address slavery within their business.
7. Tell your Congressperson to support H.R. Bill 4567 the "U.S. Contractors Liability Act," which gives the U.S. government authority over federal contractors and employees who commit human trafficking offenses outside of the U.S.
8. Spread the word! Educate your community about human trafficking, especially those who could encounter human trafficking victims and survivors. To find anti-trafficking groups in your area go to MeetUp.com. Or start one of your own.
9. Contact your Congressperson and advocate for H.R. Bill 2982 the "Human Trafficking Reporting Act," which requires states receiving specific federal funding to provide information about arrests and prosecutions of the crimes of trafficking.
10. As a foreign-language speaker, offer your language skills as an interpreter or English teacher.
11. Donate clean clothing in good condition to organizations that help people find work in the professional world. Donate working electronic devices, like computers or cell phones, to similar organizations.
12. Donate your time and professional skills to anti-trafficking efforts or to survivors of human trafficking.

For steps 10 - 12, call the National Human Trafficking Resource Center to connect with anti-trafficking services in your area. Find out how you can help by calling 1-888-373-7888. Find your Congressperson at www.house.gov/representatives/find. Find your Senator at www.senate.gov.