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## Legacy of a Massacre: The World Bank and the Chixoy Dam

Lauren Carasik

*Western New England University School of Law, Carasik@law.wne.edu*

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**Legacy of a Massacre: The World Bank and the Chixoy Dam**

by Lauren Carasik

March 13, 2012 marked the somber 30 year anniversary of the massacre of 177 innocent women and children in the remote Maya Achi village of Rio Negro, Guatemala, one of four massacres carried out against the village in 1982. Three decades later, with the unflinching courage and persistence of its leaders in the face of relentless threats, the community has unearthed the truth, reburied their dead and continues to honor their memory. Justice and reparations, however, are maddeningly elusive.

Thirty years to the moment from when the women and children of Rio Negro were bound together and marched up the steep ascent to the clearing at Pacoxom, where they were savagely killed, I trudged up the same grueling path. I was humbled by the opportunity to bear witness to this community's anguish and resilience, and painfully aware that my country carries some shameful responsibility for the massacres that decimated this village and its inhabitants.

At the massacre site, the view of the valley below was stunning. The air was scented with incense, the rhythm of the marimba lending a festive feel to the ceremony to honor and remember the dead. Smoke wafted above the altar that was tenderly layered with pine needles and flowers, candles large and small, and crosses bearing the names of the dead. Just above the altar stands the tree against which many of the women and children were smashed, the gruesome indentation created from the force of the blows providing a visceral and tangible reminder of the unspeakable carnage that day. In an act of resistance, the sacred altar was constructed in the very pit into which the bloodied corpses were thrown.

A Mayan priest guided the community through a Catholic mass and a Mayan ceremony, each recognizing the interconnection of their disparate spiritual traditions by integrating elemental components of the other. The memory of the victims was honored and the scope of the atrocity underscored as each name was read aloud, a process that went on for an excruciatingly long time. Young children embodied the community's hope and resilience as they gamboled and laughed amidst the palpable grief of their elders.

Survivors of the four Rio Negro massacres now subsist in poverty in the gritty resettlement of Pacux, on the edge of Rabinal. In the shadow of the monument containing the etched names of the dead, Carlos Chen, a survivor who lost his wife and two children in the March 13th massacre, told us of his tireless efforts to find justice for his people. Conditions in Pacux are dire: potable water is available for 15 minutes a day, the land is infertile, opportunities for education and employment are rare, and hunger and despair are rampant. Without justice and full reparations to

close the chapter of the unspeakable horror perpetrated at Rio Negro, the community is beset by repeated cycles of violence. The social fabric of this once close-knit and interdependent community has been rent asunder.

Determined to reclaim their ancestral land, several families have moved back to the village and built new huts above the elevated waterline created when Rio Negro and the Chixoy Dam basin were flooded. Many more families would return to their lives on the river if they had the means to do so. Yet thirty years later, there has not been a full accounting for the killings: several low level civil patrollers have been convicted for the murders, but the intellectual authors of the massacre remain untouched. No reparations have been paid for the destruction of the community of Rio Negro and the whole or partial devastation of 32 other villages up and down river from the Chixoy Dam wall.

The massacre at Rio Negro did occur in the broader context of the State repression, violence and genocide that plagued Guatemala for 36 years, particularly from 1975-1985, yet this harrowing story must include the circumstances that made Rio Negro a particular target. The World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank funded the Chixoy Dam, a hydroelectric project that required the displacement of 33 communities living along the river. The inhabitants of Rio Negro organized and resisted the poorly conceptualized dam project and wholly inadequate relocation plan, a position for which they paid an unthinkable price – systematic murder.

Reports of pervasive human rights abuses perpetrated by the brutal military regime were widely available by the late 1970s, yet the banks continued to support the project, shirking their oversight responsibility. The World Bank paid the final loan installment in 1985, three years after 444 Rio Negro villagers were murdered in four separate massacres. The Guatemalan military is culpable for the killings, but the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank also bear responsibility for the ill-conceived destruction of these riparian communities.

A new president will be elected to the World Bank this year. This new leadership should espouse a future model of sustainable, just and democratic economic development. The World Bank must also be held to account for the past, both to enable the restoration of the destroyed villages and to send a message to the world community that no one is above the law, including those entrusted with empowering the poor and dispossessed

The people of Rio Negro must be given the funds, tools and resources to heal and rebuild their communities. They have fought valiantly for truth and committed themselves to preserving memory. Justice and full reparations are long overdue.

Lauren Carasik is a Clinical Professor of Law and the Director of the International Human Rights Clinic and the Legal Services Clinic at Western New England University School of Law.

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