

Sample Op-Ed

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By Lucia Munoz

Called the land of perpetual spring because of its wonderful climate, Guatemala is about as big as Ohio, and is home to 11.5 million people. Land historically held and farmed cooperatively by indigenous peoples was gradually appropriated by agribusiness, until 1952 when President Jacobo Arbenz passed legislation transferring control of the land back to the indigenous. Agribusiness worked with the CIA to overthrow Arbenz and install a CIA-backed government to help make the hemisphere safe for capitalism.

The abuse and marginalization of the poor and indigenous population of Guatemala continues today with the empowerment of global corporations that control the government and placate the middle class with promise of employment and the western consumerist lifestyle. Meanwhile the poor are increasingly excluded from the bounty.

I visited Guatemala, where I was born, in late July as part of a weeklong fact-finding delegation of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, an international human rights organization based in Cambridge, Mass. This delegation focused on the risks faced by human rights workers since the departure a year ago of the United Nations Verification Mission in Guatemala, the increasing dangers to women from what is being called "femicide," and the efforts of the communities targeted for removal or massacred during construction of the Chixoy hydro-electric dam in the 1980s to gain reparations.

My particular interest is in women's issues, and there is plenty of work to do in this area. As of August there have been already 331 women murdered this year, a stark reminder of how far women's rights have to go.

Our delegation started in Antigua, Guatemala, the colonial capital city. There we heard about a dozen speakers who shared experiences ranging from torture at the hands of American operatives to inhumane approaches to displacing people from their lands during the filling of the Chixoy reservoir. We heard about and visited UUSC-sponsored projects that are assisting grassroots organizations in Guatemala seeking to reclaim their lives and dignity.

In Guatemala City, we visited the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation, which is identifying bodies of massacre victims exhumed from clandestine graves. We also visited the monuments to the memory of the victims of the massacres in Rabinal cemetery, erected by Association for the Integral Development of Victims of Violence. Later we met with Juan Manual Geronimo, president of the Association for Justice and Reconciliation, which is helping relatives of massacre victims in their quest for justice and accountability.

We heard from witnesses of the death and destruction of the people of Guatemala caused directly and indirectly by the CIA. We saw the exhumed bodies of children and adults massacred in the name of free-market capitalism. We heard about the economic and cultural assault on the native populations.

Historically, Guatemala has been a culture grounded in spiritual and family values, but the economic and cultural despair following the long civil war has given rise to a community where materialism and violence are supplanting traditional values. Globalism and the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) will change the economic picture so that Chapinos (Guatemalans) will need to work harder and harder to make ends meet.

The Guatemalan government made 11 agreements with the people in the peace accords of 1996 and most of these promises are not being met. With the departure of the United Nations in December 2004, it is up to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to apply pressure to the government to meet the accords.

If I wanted to go back to live in Guatemala, I could do hands-on help for women and girls there, but what I learned on my visit reaffirmed my belief that it's more important to live here in my second home in the "belly of the beast" and try to make a difference to women in my native country. I'm in the process of setting up a nonprofit organization to help fund efforts for women in Guatemala.

(Lucia Munoz, a resident of Costa Mesa, is a counselor with Girls Inc. in Orange County, and is Women's Affairs Coordinator for the Guatemala Peace and Development Network.)