
Collective Memory, Collective Resistance



Guatemala's brutal civil war ended in 1996, but the injustice, exclusion, and racism that marked the conflict remain. The same motive that fueled military offensives of the 1980s – the determination to control communities, their lands and resources – is propelling the economic and political powers of today to impose mega-“development” projects on indigenous peoples' lands.

Nevertheless, the resistance continues. After years of imposed silence and terror, groups of courageous war survivors and their advocates are stepping up, telling their stories of the past in order to forge peace and justice in the present.

One such group is the *Historical Memory Initiative* (“Iniciativa de la Memoria Histórica”), a grassroots organization based in the central highland region of Quiché. Through information-sharing and community organizing, group members reconstruct collective experiences from Guatemala's 36-year civil war as a tool to seek justice and to address current issues, such as the militarization of security and the imposition of large-scale, so-called development projects that threaten to wreak social and environmental havoc in rural areas.



“By planting memories, we harvest struggles”

From a Communiqué by the Historical Memory Initiative:

In 1976, the Guatemalan Army began the siege and occupation of the northern part of the department of Quiché. Our towns, communities and neighborhoods filled with displaced people, dead bodies, widows, widowers and orphans due to the scorched earth military operations, patrols and paramilitaries, model villages, military offensives and counteroffensives, and counterinsurgency campaigns until the Peace Accords were signed in 1996.

In 1996, PEACE and FREE TRADE arrived at the same time. As the violence ceased, we began to see offensives waged openly and undercover by national and international companies in the same area and on the same people that had recently survived the internal armed conflict. National and international money penetrated and invaded the region without informing or consulting – and in fact, misinforming – the people who had shed blood while protecting the natural resources coveted by national and international capital.

The government is now remilitarizing the northern part of the country, including the Quiché region. Groups of civilians have been rearmed to fight common crime and drug trafficking, and new military bases are proliferating.

The absence of justice in this country has meant that the counterinsurgency powers of the past not only have not disappeared, but have consolidated and strengthened their power on a national level. As of today, not a single person responsible for the genocide and massacres carried out against our people and communities has been tried and punished.

The experience of 12 years of PEACE has shown us that it is not the State, but the PEOPLE, who are the true guarantors of MEMORY and JUSTICE in Guatemala.

MEGA-PROJECTS

[from a Historical Memory bulletin]

At the heart of public policy in Guatemala today is the push to privatize natural resources in order to concede them to international or national capital. Land, mineral resources, forests, and water sources continue to be privatized across the country. In the Quiché region alone,



Recovering memories of war

the creation of new military corps such as the Green Battalions, and the activation of civil defense patrols in rural areas are strong signs of the remilitarization of the State of Guatemala.

over 40 hydro-electric, mining, oil, and biofuel projects are planned.

RE-MILITARIZATION

[from a Historical Memory bulletin]

In September 2008, Guatemala's President Álvaro Colom announced an increase to the Guatemalan army of 9,500 troops. This expansion violates the Peace Accords which established a 33% reduction of troops.

The rise in troops and in the military budget, along with the reinstating of old military bases,

ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES

The United States government financed, trained, and otherwise supported the Guatemalan army which was responsible for over 90% of the human rights violations committed during the armed conflict. Now in the post-war period, the U.S. has maintained its control in the region through economic means such as "free" trade agreements like CAFTA and other harmful neo-liberal policies. U.S. capital has been responsible for a significant share of the exploitation of natural resources in Guatemala. For instance, U.S.-based companies with mining and electric interests in the Quiché region include Geominas S.A., Quimis S.A., Exportación y Servicios S.A., and Sandia Laboratories.

Recently, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has teamed up with Wal-Mart and Mercy Corps in a program that seeks to "build the capacity of small-scale farmers to help them move from traditional corn and beans production to demand-driven production to supply major retailers like Wal-Mart in Central America." This type of agro-export model has not alleviated poverty in the region; rather, it has further concentrated wealth and has intensified monopolization by transnational corporations like Wal-Mart, while burdening rural communities with debt and ensuring their dependence on external market forces, thereby threatening their food security and self-sufficiency.

About NISGUA

The U.S.-based Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA) employs strategic, creative, and coordinated grassroots activism and advocacy to pursue justice for wartime crimes, to change harmful U.S. policies, and to promote sustainable communities in Guatemala. NISGUA provides human rights accompaniment to Guatemalans whose work puts them at risk of threats and attacks, especially witness involved in high-impact human rights cases and community groups and leaders defending their rights in the face of natural resource extraction.

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