

Coming to a town near you:

NISGUA's 2000 "Justice and Impunity" Tour

Union workers who ask for living wages are kidnapped and forced in exile.

Family members of civilians murdered during the internal conflict are harassed when they tell the story of their suffering.

Peasants who lose their land as a consequence of privatization, or internationally run projects, are threatened or tortured when they object.

Imagine that.

Now imagine that there is no one you can turn to.

Thousands of ordinary people in Guatemala suffer the consequences of injustice or impunity on a daily basis. When residents of the "colonías" in the vicinity of Guatemala City in April 2000 protested a 50% raise in bus-prices which had come about due to liberalization of transport prices and withdrawal of state subsidies, the government refused to act for several days. The government did not step in till 4 people had been killed in the riots.

36 years of internal conflict in Guatemala did not change much. Over 200,000 people have been killed or disappeared and many more have been forced to flee their homes. But the economic elite whose personal interests spurred the war – through a U.S. sponsored coup d'état – is still in power. The difference is that they are now supported by international lending institutions and agencies that push liberalization and privatization without thought for the consequences.

Meanwhile, the Guatemalan justice system is so weak that it has been deemed "neglected", "inefficient", "incompetent", "corrupt", and "influence-peddling" by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers (link to: <http://www.unhcr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/TestFrame/943b96c39e25fd858025689c005a7e36?Opendocument>). Yet, victims of the Guatemalan internal conflict have courageously stepped forward to provide testimony on human rights abuses committed during the war, and human rights lawyers continue to represent them in national and international courts despite threats and intimidation.

In October 2000, NISGUA will sponsor a speaking tour of some of these courageous people. As representatives of the Guatemalan grassroots movement, they will share their personal stories of injustice and impunity. The speakers will talk about their work against social and economic injustice and the threats and intimidation against themselves and their families. They will share strategies for change and survival, and– along with the accompanying NISGUA representative – will join the audience in looking for permanent solutions.

Impunity and International Lending Agencies – Mid West

In 1982, the Guatemalan government forceably uprooted and relocated the entire village of Rio Negro to make space for a World Bank hydroelectric dam project. The resettlement agreement signed between the inhabitants and the Guatemalan government before the relocation was consistently violated, and the government finally resorted to genocide as a means to remove the village. Between 1980 and 1982, five massacres happened in Rio Negro – an area with very low level of guerrilla movement – killing over half of the community's original 800 inhabitants. A survivor of these massacres, Jesus Tecu Osorio will be touring the Mid Western region, talking about the adverse consequences of World Bank policies in rural Guatemala and about the impunity linked to "crimes of profit." Jesus Tecu Osorio won the Reebok Human Rights Award in 1996 for his continued work and leadership in the area of human rights. He currently works at the "Bufete Popular" (People's Law-firm) in Rabinal in

Western Guatemala.

For more information on Jesus' work, see his biography. (link to: <http://www.forefrontleaders.org/awards/bios/jesus.html>)

Impunity and Domestic Genocide Proceedings – West Coast

On May 3 this year, the Community of Santa Maria Tzeja joined several other Mayan communities in presenting a case before the Guatemalan courts, charging former General Romeo Lucas García – who ruled Guatemala by coup d'état from 1978 to 1982 – with genocide and crimes against humanity. This legal case has been under preparation for years. Archeologists and forensic experts have been collecting physical evidence of the genocide, while surviving victims of the genocidal policies like the community of Santa Maria Tzeja have prepared psychologically to relive their horrific past in court. Nobody thought the case was going to be easy, but few had foreseen the immediate proofs of continuing impunity in Guatemala. A couple of days after the case was launched court-witnesses from Santa Maria Tzeja were roughed up by the police in Guatemala City. A week after the case was launched, the weaving cooperative in Santa Maria Tzeja was burned to the ground in a case of unsolved arson. A representative for the Mayan Community of Santa Maria Tzeja will tour the West Coast to talk about this and other cases of continued impunity.

Impunity and International Genocide Proceedings – East Coast

In late March 2000, the Spanish courts accepted jurisdiction over a case launched by various victims of the genocidal policies carried out in Guatemala in the early 1980's against ex-General Efraín Ríos-Montt – now President of the Guatemalan Congress – on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity. The case is headed by Nobel Laureate Rigoberta Menchú. Needless to say, the acceptance of the case has led to a surge in death-threats against all persons involved, including e-mail threats to the Spanish lawyers presenting the case. Rosario Pu – a long-term activist on land-issues in Guatemala – will tour the East Coast talking about her involvement with the case and about the continued impunity with regard to unequal land-distribution. Even now, land-owners notoriously refuse to pay both living wages to their workers and taxes owed to the state, and they use private armed guards to insist on their "property rights."

Impunity and Labor Rights – South

The case of the Sindicato de los Trabajadores Bananeros de Izabal (SITRABI) is a notorious example of how far the Guatemalan government will go to protect special economic interests. SITRABI is the strongest labor union in the banana plantations in the East of Guatemala representing more than 1000 workers. When in October 1999 SITRABI's leaders were kidnapped and forced at gun-point to call off a planned strike in Bandegua (wholly-owned subsidiary of Del Monte), the government didn't step in. When, in the days that followed, the labor leaders fled with their families to Guatemala City because of continued death-threats, the government didn't step in. Now, as the Bandegua workers have obtained some concessions, and have negotiated and signed a contract with the company, the government feels the problem has been solved. However, the people behind the kidnapping and death-threats – who later were rewarded by Del Monte with the ownership of one of the plantations – have yet to pay for their crimes in court. Enrique Villeda, one of the internally exiled union leaders, will tour the South to talk about impunity and labor rights, and about the rule of money and big corporations in Guatemala.

See also action alert on the SITRABI case (link to: <http://www.nisgua.org/Action Links/Del Monte alert.htm>)