

NISGUA Speakers Tour—October 2002

Globalizing Justice

Since the beginning of the year, there has been a drastic and frightening increase in threats, attacks, and murders in Guatemala, which have left the country in an increasingly precarious state. Despite this, human rights workers continue their struggle for justice. The current situation is not only representative of the impunity and corruption in Guatemala but also of the greater human rights issues facing the region and the international community.

NISGUA's 2002 tour—Globalizing Justice—will explore the current violence in Guatemala and the civil society movement to create fair economic, judicial and political systems that benefit both the local community and its environment.

To learn more about how you can host a speaker in your area, contact Carrie Ferrence at 202-518-7638 or nisgua@igc.org

The South— Plan Puebla Panama, Oil, Transgenic Products, and Environmental Rights

In June 2001, the government signed an accord with Petrolea del Atlantico allowing them to drill in Lake Izabal and in nearly 500 square miles of lowlands and jungles in eastern Guatemala. This May, President Alfonso Portillo canceled (at least for now) the contract after environmental groups in Guatemala exposed the devastating impact that would follow from exploitation of the area for oil.

In June 2002, the UN World Food Program and the USAID distributed genetically modified (GM) corn in Guatemala as a form of international aid. The environmental group Madre Selva commissioned studies of the corn and strongly denounced the presence of GM food aid.

Oil and Transgenic Products are just some of the 'hot topics' in Guatemala right now. NISGUA will host a speaker from a prominent human rights group to speak about how these issues—along with Plan Puebla Panama and environmental degradation—could impact the economy, politics and, most importantly, communities in Guatemala.

The Northeast— Indigenous and Land Rights

Land rights are a controversial and heated topic in Guatemala. Much of the problems arise from communities that were either forcibly removed from their land or who chose to flee during the violent civil war. Decades later, many are still struggling to reclaim the land that is legally theirs. Because of their commitment, land activists increasingly have been subjected to threats and attacks. In fact, six land activists have been killed in the last 15 months in the department of Izabal alone.

The land movement has become one of the strongest in Guatemala, not only because of the breadth of the work but because organizers have been able to reach out to other issues, including issues of trade and globalization. The speaker will discuss the historical context of the land disputes, the movement for indigenous and land rights, the recent wave of violence, impacts of globalization on land rights, and the present state on instability in Guatemala

The Midwest— The Association for Justice and Reconciliation

The Association for Justice and Reconciliation made history when it launched Central America's first lawsuit to accuse a sitting political figure of genocide. The lawsuit, by 11 ethnic Mayan communities in Guatemala's northern and central mountains, charges that the current head of Congress, Efraín Ríos Montt, presided over a brutal policy of racial extermination as the nation's dictator in the early 1980s. In 2000 AJR also launched a suit against former dictator Romeo Lucas García. These suits are the first step in a process that community members hope will bring justice against those who orchestrated the deaths of more than 200,000 people, most of them Mayan, during Guatemala's 36-year civil war.

Those involved with the cases continuously have been the target of intimidations and attacks. Despite their fear, they have struggled to reach out to others who were affected by the war and to those in the international community, so that they might better understand the current violence in Guatemala. The speaker will present their personal experiences with the war, the struggle of organizing communities to fight impunity, and the present state of instability in Guatemala.

The West Coast—Plan Puebla Panama: Dams and the Devastating Impacts on the Peten

Despite its name, Plan Puebla Panama (so named by Mexican president Vicente Fox) is actually a combination of several plans, developed to connect southern Mexico and all of Central America. If completed in full, it would include five dry canal mega-projects that would stretch from East to West and one large industrial and transportation infrastructure running from North to South. Governments, corporations, oil refineries and international institutions—including the World Bank, the IMF, and USAID—have joined forces to launch this plan in hopes of connecting all major development zones from southern Mexico to Panama.

However, the Plan, which would lead to massive industrial development of the maquila sector, rampant and uncontrolled ecological devastation, vast displacement of native communities, and increased militarization, could irrevocably damage the entire region—rich in culture, biodiversity and natural wealth and the precious Mayan Biosphere rainforest. La Quetzal, one of the Guatemala Accompaniment Project (G.A.P.) communities would be greatly affected by the Plan, and along with other communities in the Peten, it has mobilized to stop the creation of dams in its region, which could flood their land and destroy their livelihood.