

“Women Speak Out”

NISGUA 2003 Fall Tour

Northeast: Election Season Violence, Impunity and CICIACS (September 28-October 15)

On July 24-25, 2003, Ríos Montt, President Alfonso Portillo, and the FRG government organized, financed, and directed thousands of violent protesters to riot in Guatemala City and demand that Ríos Montt be allowed to run for president in the upcoming November 9 presidential elections. Political violence and the trampling of democracy have been drawn out for a number of months and some would argue for over two years. Journalists, human rights workers, land activists, Maya priests, judges, prosecutors, lawyers, and witnesses have all been targets during a wave of violence that appears to be directed at all facets of society struggling for economic, social, and political reforms to a significantly damaged democratic system.

Guatemalan human rights groups, civil society organizations, and the international community have believed that the political violence has been perpetrated by clandestine paramilitary organizations, organized crime groups, and "parallel powers" -- other entities that may still wield significant power within the government or the military. The most recent violence in Guatemala City demonstrates another prevailing fear, that these attacks are intimately linked to State policy and are setting the stage for the resurgence of a dictatorial regime grounded in the National Security Doctrine.

In March 2003, pressure from national and international human rights organizations forced the Guatemalan government, in coordination with the United Nations and the Organization of American States, to create the Commission to Investigate Illegal Groups and Clandestine Security Apparatuses (CICIACS). There is reserved hope that this commission will be able to independently investigate past human rights violations and finally break the cycle of impunity. The commission will have a one year mandate, with the option of briefly extending the investigatory phase. The prosecution stage as of yet remains unclear.

Iduvina Hernandez, Executive Director of SEDEM, recently has analyzed increasing threats and intimidation targeted at journalist and human rights defenders, the remilitarization of Guatemalan society, proposed legislation for the civilian body to be in charge of the president and vice president's security (as opposed to a military, intelligence based body), and presidential campaign financing among other topics. A journalist by trade, Ms. Hernandez is a frequent columnist in the *Revista Domingo* in newspaper *Prensa Libre*. Over the course of the year, Iduvina has been victim of anonymous threatening phone calls and technical espionage.

Ms. Hernandez will speak about the creation of the Commission to Investigate Illegal Groups and Clandestine Security Apparatuses (CICIACS), the opportunity to dismantle the institutionalized culture of impunity, the presidential candidacy of General Ríos Montt and the politics of this election period.

The Association for the Study and Promotion of Security in a Democracy (SEDEM) is a nongovernmental organization that promotes democratic control of intelligence services in Guatemala, as contemplated in the Peace Accords. SEDEM works to contribute to the strengthening of democracy and give validity to the rule of law in the country. Its mission is to promote the supervision and control of Guatemalan security services, including the police, army and intelligence services. SEDEM offers technical assistance, access to information, documentation and expert opinion. The organization also produces publication on related subjects. Their most recent publication is entitled, "Protection Guide for Human Rights Defenders, Journalist and Justice Operators." This guide and the workshops on security and protection offered to local human rights organizations and journalist are excellent resources for other organizations and activists given the increase in human rights violations in the last few years.

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Southwest: Rios Montt, Genocide Cases, Impunity (October 9th-26th)

Atrocities during Guatemala’s thirty-six-year civil war peaked under the dictatorships of Fernando Romeo Lucas García (1978-1982) and Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983). During these years, security forces killed over 110,000 Guatemalan civilians and razed approximately 600 Mayan villages. Approximately 83.3% of those killed were indigenous, and close to 93% of the massacres were committed by the Guatemalan Army or other State sponsored security forces. Survivors suffer from immense physical and mental injuries, have lost family members and community leaders, and bore witness to unbearable violence. In 1999, a U.N.-sponsored Truth Commission classified this unadulterated violence against indigenous communities as a state policy of genocide.

Natalia Escobedo Caba is a Maya Ixil woman who will represent Association for Justice and Reconciliation (AJR). The AJR is the association of witnesses and communities that are pressing charges of genocide. Her community along with over a hundred other victims and family members in 20 rural communities have charged the high military command of the regimes of Lucas Garcia (1981-82) and Efraín Rios Montt (1982-83) with genocide in May 2000 and June 2001, respectively. Ms. Escobedo is from the community of Ilom where on March 23, 1982 at 5:00 in the morning, the Guatemalan Army with patrollers from the Finca la Perla arrived in the village of Ilom, Chajul, Quiché. They went from house to house announcing a town meeting. Several hours later community members were gathered near the church when the Army and patrollers separated the men from the women. They selected about 55 unarmed men who were taken to the school house where the Army killed them with firearms. Then they forced survivors to dig graves, take the cadavers out of the school and bury them. The Army and patrollers ordered the survivors to leave the area, threatening to kill them if they didn’t leave. Then they proceeded to burn down the homes, loot private property, and destroy harvest. Natalia was a young child during the violence however she participates in activities coordinated by the local widow’s committee and by CONIC, a national indigenous and campesinos organization working on land rights.

Association for Justice and Reconciliation (AJR)

The Association for Justice and Reconciliation was formed in April 2000 by a group of genocide survivors who lived through massacres during the years 1981 and 1982. AJR’s initial members were survivors from 10 massacres in 9 communities that accused the Military High Command of Romeo Lucas García of having committed crimes against humanity, including genocide, and war crimes. The association was expanded in May 2001 to include survivors from another 11 communities that have denounced the Military High Command of Efraín Ríos Montt for the same crimes. Since then, two new communities have joined the AJR in its legal efforts, making the AJR a total of 22 communities. By working collectively, AJR members aim to strengthen their access to the Guatemalan judicial system while developing solidarity, communication and consciousness across communities at the ground level. AJR members are actively reestablishing meaningful social and political ties broken during years of civil war, as well as establishing links across communities that – due to poverty, insecurity, and isolation – were never able to develop in the first place. By confronting those responsible for the genocide, plaintiffs move from being victims to survivors and so regain a sense of dignity, pride, and control over their own destinies, helping to alleviate the hopelessness that remains a lasting legacy of the war, especially in many indigenous communities. All AJR witnesses have already testified before the Prosecutor’s Office and exhumations have been carried out. Since October 2000, AJR has held national gatherings twice a year during which AJR members share their experiences, and discuss the state of the nation and the status of the legal cases.



Southeast: PPP/CAFTA (October 10th-28th)

While the US throughout much of the world still flexes its military muscle, in the Americas, overt military force has largely given way to economic policy, a quiet killer. Through infrastructure mega-projects like the Plan Puebla Panama, and trade and investment agreements such as the US/Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), the US government and multinational companies will extract even more natural resources, exploit Maya culture, privatize basic services, and even further skew the distribution of wealth in the region.

Since the announcement of the Plan Puebla Panama by Mexican President Vicente Fox in 2001, and the Bush Administrations desire to complete CAFTA negotiations by the end of 2003, civil society organizations have organized and resisted throughout the region.

The Southeast United States this Summer and Fall is host to three key events that will help shape this long term economic policy. From July 28-August 1, 2003, the negotiators from the six CAFTA countries met in New Orleans, LA for the 6th round of CAFTA negotiations. Protests, workshops, and international speakers criticized the negotiations, and demanded that the draft text of the agreement be released.

From October 20-24, the 8th round of CAFTA negotiations will take place in Houston, TX. Civil society organizations must be included in the consultation process so that their opinions are considered along with those of business interests.

And from November 19-21, 2003, the trade ministers of all 34 countries negotiating the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) will meet in Miami. The FTAA follows the model of NAFTA, US-Chile, and CAFTA and will perpetuate the disastrous consequences of NAFTA to the rest of the Western Hemisphere.

Maria Domingo a Maya Mam originally from the department of Huehuetenango went into refuge in Mexico at age 10. Upon returning to Guatemala, her family settled in Copal AA, Alta Verapaz. She has actively participated in the organizing efforts of Mama Maquin from the age of 18 and is currently the regional coordinator of Mama Maquin in Alta Verapaz, participates in negotiations for women's access to co-ownership of land, imparts informational workshops on the topics of free trade, Plan Puebla Panama (PPP), and genetically modified crops in rural communities and is the organizational representative to the Mesa Global. She has participated in international gatherings in Thailand, Mexico, and Cuba on the topics of experiences of refugee women, the participation of indigenous women, and free trade issues.

Mama Maquin was formed in 1990 as an organization of Guatemalan women in refuge in Mexico. The organization was formed out of the need for women to organize themselves and gather strength to return to Guatemala. Mamá Maquin began in the state of Chiapas, Mexico and then the organizers visited communities in refugee camps in Quintana Roo and Campeche. The organization's aims are to struggle for women's rights, including co-ownership of land by women, and to advocate for equality between men and women and between the poor and the rich. Currently they are working in the areas of Nentón, Huehuetenango, Ixcán, and Alta Verapaz in four main work areas: health, co-ownership of land, citizen participation, and organization as a part of their strategic work plan. Mamá Maquin is a member of MesaGlobal, an umbrella group working against globalization and free trade issues. Members of Mamá Maquin have been involved in workshops and conferences regarding free trade and globalization.

Northwest: Rural Development, Coffee, Land Distribution (October 13th-31st)

In the past few years, coffee prices in Guatemala and throughout Central America have plummeted, which has had a devastating impact on the tens of thousands of plantation workers who depend on the harvest. Recently, a crisis in overproduction in developing countries has led to a sharp decline in prices. This shift has led to a marked increase in rural unemployment.

The vast majority (80%) of the Guatemalan population lives in either poverty or extreme poverty. A report in the Spring of 2000 by the Commission for the Verification of Corporate Codes of Conduct revealed that half of all Guatemalan coffee pickers in its survey were paid less than half the legal minimum wage of \$2.48 per day. In addition, most do not have access to running water or electricity.

In response to the disastrous coffee crisis and the longer term, but no less destabilizing, land distribution conflicts, a coalition of groups in Guatemala has developed a plan for lasting and sustainable development. Their alternative, the Plan to Attend Socially the Coffee Crisis and Agrarian Conflictivity, has garnered strong support from civil society and plantation workers but has reached a standstill with the government.

The Consultative Group (CG) has highlighted the need to establish clear budget priorities to implement commitments established by the Peace Accords. In particular, donors are concerned that military spending is higher than allocations for social services and that the government has not facilitated access to productive land among poor rural families. In addition to CG recommendations that focused on human rights concerns and stabilizing democratic structures, access to productive resources, poverty reduction, and progressive rural development schemes were high on their list.

NISGUA's Northwest speaker will talk about alternative rural development programs, the archaic distribution of land resources, and the coffee crisis and its connections to the destabilizing "free trade" model.

In addition, the speaker will talk about the community group she is involved in (ASUDI), the lack of access to land and what effects that has on rural families (poverty, malnutrition), and the work of the Plataforma.

Paulina Culum, Asociación de Sololatecos Unidos para el Desarrollo Integral (Association of Sololatecos United for Integral Development) (ASUDI)
(Speaker Biography will arrive shortly)

Plataforma Agraria

Founded in 1998, Plataforma Agraria (Agrarian Platform) is a coalition of 15 campesino, human rights, academic, and religious organizations that seeks to construct a broad-based movement in favor of structural change in the countryside that favors rural development for the marginalized, rural poor. The Plataforma's strategy for bringing about such change involves organization and advocacy at both the local and national levels, combines specific demands and national agendas, and seeks immediate as well as long-term gains for the rural population. The aim is to dismantle the structures of oppression, concentration of wealth, authoritarianism and the predatory approach to the natural world that characterizes the current economic regime. The proposals the Plataforma is currently advocating include the Coffee Reform, which seeks to address the crisis created by plummeting international coffee prices, and a rural development proposal, *Abriendo Brecha*. Both proposals recognize in the campesino and indigenous majority the key to achieving sustainable growth and equitable development.

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*Midwest: Youth Organizing/Awareness, Political Violence, Globalization, Militarization
(October 1st -27th)*

The generation of adults now in their 20's and 30's in Guatemala were young children during the height of the civil war. To understand that history, so that it never happens again, many groups organize workshops, trainings, conferences, and protests. These groups have been active in the recent protests where thousands dressed in all black to show their complete horror and outrage for the decision by the Constitutional Court to allow Rios Montt to run for president. These young people are also active in making the connections between the current political instability, violence, and the economic policy that is often at the root of the problem.

These groups are targets of political repression, not only for their outspoken analysis of the current situation, but for their articulation of an alternative society. Their creativity, inspiration, and ability are not only needed in Guatemala, but also here in the United States. Students, newly formed groups, as well as more established committees will all benefit from an exchange of ideas about how to make the connections between the past and the present.

NISGUA's speaker will talk about generating excitement for learning about the past, confronting that history, and acting with coherence. Presentations will include creative action ideas, possible joint projects around human rights, and analysis of what globalization really means on the ground.

Wendy Santizo, founder of H.I.J.O.S. Guatemala, spent many years of her life in Vancouver, Canada in exile as a result of the violence in Guatemala. In 1999 she returned to Guatemala to work for social change in her birth country. At that time she and other youth formed H.I.J.O.S. Guatemala – the first HIJOS group was formed in 1994 in Argentina – and since then H.I.J.O.S. groups have formed in various parts of the Americas. A part from her work with H.I.J.O.S., Wendy works at PRODESSA, a local development organization, on educational reform issues including the right to education and the Peace Accords. She will speak about H.I.J.O.S. Guatemala's work including recent work on globalization, anti-militarization and outreach to raise awareness in other youth.

H.I.J.O.S. Guatemala

Sons and Daughters for Identity, Justice, and Remembrance Against Silence (H.I.J.O.S. Hijos y Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio) is a collective of young people who were children when their family members were disappeared, killed or massacred during Guatemala's civil war. In 1999, they joined together to form H.I.J.O.S. Guatemala in order to establish the truth about what happened and seek justice. Before Guatemala's 36-year war formally ended with the signing of the 1996 Peace Accords, approximately 200,000 people were extrajudicially executed or “disappeared” at the hands of Guatemalan state forces. H.I.J.O.S. Guatemala is committed to vindicating the thousands of victims fallen to the military practices in Guatemala and utilizes alternative educational tools to teach youth about this history so they can understand today's struggle for social justice. H.I.J.O.S. Guatemala members convey their message through presentations, art therapy, street art, poetry, music, photography, documentaries, music festivals, publications, and popular theater, through which they hope to create a culture of awareness and promote the struggle for social justice.