

Story last updated at 12:53 p.m. Saturday, October 25, 2003

Reliving atrocities

Guatemalans in Kansas City asking for help

By Ben Embry

The Examiner

Eastern Jackson County's Daily Newspaper

The maiming began at dusk, after soldiers rounded up more than 30 Mayan peasants and locked them into a clinic.

They cut off their noses. They cut off their ears. They cut off their mouths. Then, they took them up the hill from the clinic and choked them by wrapping sticks around their necks and shot them, leaving them half-buried in the dirt.

Five weeks later, the soldiers returned.

"The army entered my mother's house and grabbed my mother. They hit her with firewood. After that, they cut off her nose, ears and mouth. We were in the house. The army tied my hands behind my back. They hung my sister from the neck ... In front of the children, they grabbed us. They raped us in front of my three children," said Maria Teresa Sic de Mendoza, a Maya Achi farmer who lost her husband and parents, as well as other family members, during the 1982 Chichupac massacre. "Then they hung us. We had a machete for working. My 5-year-old daughter cut my hands free with the machete and I cut down my sister, who was hanging from the neck. I ran to get water and I blew in her mouth so my sister would come back."

For Maria and other who lost loved ones during Guatemala's brutal civil war, grief over the past is fusing with terror about the future: Gen. Efraim Rios Montt, the strongman widely believed responsible for the Chichupac massacre and hundreds of other war atrocities, is running for president.

Across the world, human rights groups and governments, including the United States, fear a Rios Montt victory could unravel what little democracy exists in Guatemala, a country wracked by poverty, violence and official corruption.

But nowhere is the fear and fury more palpable than in villages such as Chichupac, where troops during Rios Montt's presidency implemented what a UN-sponsored truth commission labeled a "scorched earth" campaign to quash leftist rebels.

"I am very unhappy thinking that he could win," said Maria, 50, as tears spilled down her weathered face. "I have a lot of pain because I don't have my family. My heart is very heavy because of this."

Two years ago, Chichupac joined 23 Guatemalan communities in a lawsuit charging Rios Montt with genocide. A special prosecutor is investigating whether to bring the case to trial.

Maria is now on a five-city tour to tell her harrowing story of rape and murder. Co-sponsored by the Kansas City Interfaith Peace Alliance and Network in Solidarity with Guatemala, Maria spoke at Peace Chapel, 600 Broadway, last night as part of Women Speak Out, a nationwide tour featuring five victims of Guatemala's "scorched earth" policy.



Julie Scheidegger/the Examiner

■ With the local support of the Kansas City Interfaith Peace Alliance and her translator Jael Humphrey-Skomer, left, Maria Teresa Sic de Mendoza will tell her story of genocide to gain

American support for justice.

"It is necessary for people to hear my story so this does not happen again. We do not want to suffer anymore. We do not want more massacres. We do not want more blood.

"We want a good government," she said on Monday through her translator Jael Humphrey-Skomer. "I come to tell my story because of the pain I suffer."

Rios Montt, 77, a former evangelist preacher who is president of the Guatemalan legislature, has denied any involvement in the massacres.

Praised by then-U.S. President Ronald Reagan during the 18 months in which he ruled Guatemala after seizing power in a 1982 coup, Rios Montt remains one of the most powerful men in Guatemala. A conservative populist, he hovers at third place in polls but has the best-oiled party machinery and could sway many undecided voters, according to a recent article from the Associated Press. After a 12-way runoff Nov. 9, voters will cast ballots for the top two candidates Dec. 28.

More than 200,000 people, most of them indigenous, died or disappeared during the 1960-96 civil war in Guatemala. The truth commission concluded that the worst carnage occurred during Rios Montt's brief rule, especially in the Rabinal area where Chichupac is located.

But the road to justice for past human rights violations in Guatemala remains a long, slow and potentially dangerous one. To consolidate power and generate votes, Montt paid settlements to former members of the brutal paramilitary groups that participated in the government-supported massacres during the country's 36-year civil war shortly after his decision to run for election.

"We want reparations for what happened to us," Maria said. "The army is giving money to those who participated in the massacres but not to the victims."

And, as much as reparations, Maria wants justice justice for the victims of the atrocities committed during the war.

"Justice for us would be to capture these people and put them in jail," she said forcefully. "We who survived this know who is responsible. They killed our people. For this, we want justice."

For more information about the atrocities committed during Guatemala's 36-year civil war, visit www.justicefor-genocide.org.

To reach Ben Embry, e-mail ben.embry@examiner.net or call (816) 350-6323.