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Communique #1

Contact:  
Grahame Russell  
416-654-2074  
info@rightsaction.org

#### CHIXOY DAM / RIO NEGRO MASSACRES REPARATIONS CAMPAIGN:

to get full compensation and just reparations  
from the World Bank & the Inter-American Development Bank  
for indigenous (Mayan-Achi) survivors of the Rio Negro community  
destroyed by construction of the Chixoy Dam in Guatemala

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\*\*\* Please contact our office if you would like to financially support this work and/or get involved yourself

Dear friends,

As lead up to the forth-coming Annual Meetings of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in Prague (Czech Republic), Rights Action is releasing a series of articles and other information concerning the Chixoy Dam Project and Rio Negro massacres of 1982.

For some, this is a “development” project of the past.

For others – including primarily the surviving victims of the massacres associated with the Chixoy Dam Project – this is an on-going and open wound for the still suffering, surviving victims and it is a “development”/ human rights issue of great consequence.

#### WORST CASE SCENARIO

The Chixoy Dam Project and related Rio Negro massacres present us with an on-going and terrible ‘worst-case-scenario’:

- historic discrimination against and exploitation of an isolated Mayan-Achi community;
- a military regime trained, armed and financed by the United States, carrying out systematic massacres, disappearances, torture and rape against its own predominantly Mayan population;
- a large scale “development” project, financed by the “first” world via the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, that not only was ill-conceived as a project (with no consultation with the local community, etc.), but which put the WB and the IDB in direct partnership with a regime that, as later concluded by the United Nations “Truth Commission”, carried out genocide against regions of the Mayan population;
- a community of surviving victims of the massacres that is still traumatized, and living in conditions of worse poverty and much more desperation than 25 years ago.

While we should struggle for proper compensation and just reparations for the surviving victims of the Chixoy Dam massacres, we should also learn from this story of criminal US-back repression of a Mayan population intersecting with an ill-conceived and improperly implemented “development” project, funded by “first” world governments via international development institutions.

#### CHIXOY DAM / RIO NEGRO

The townspeople of Rio Negro were forcibly and mercilessly displaced from their home community to make way for the construction of the Chixoy Dam project, 1975-1985, funded by the WB (World Bank) and the IDB (Inter-American Development Bank) to the tune of almost \$300,000,000.

In all, more than 440 Rio Negro townspeople were massacred. Most survivors still live in conditions of poverty and psychological trauma today.

Early in 2000, Rights Action, along with the International Rivers Network and the Reform the World Bank Campaign (Italy), initiated a campaign: "to get full compensation and just reparations from the World Bank & the Inter-American Development Bank for indigenous (Mayan-Achi) survivors of the Rio Negro community destroyed by construction of the Chixoy Dam in Guatemala."

We have not gotten very far.

Neither the WB nor the IDB has accepted any responsibility for the massacres and repression against the Rio Negro community, that was in opposition to be forcibly removed from their home community to make way for the Chixoy Dam Project.

Though both Banks have admitted that the survivors live today in terrible conditions, neither Bank has assumed any responsibility for compensating or repairing their situation today.

#### SKELETON IN THE CLOSETS

The issue of the Rio Negro / Chixoy Dam massacres is a major skeleton in the closets of the WB and the IDB – and they are in denial mode about what happened, about what was their contributory role and about what is their on-going responsibility.

There is much public education and advocacy work to be done with this campaign. Below, you will find an article that provides some good background. Tomorrow, we will continue with more contents about the demands and claims of the Campaign.

Along with the surviving victims of the Chixoy Dam massacres, WE NEED YOUR SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGE YOU to take on this issue as one that your organization can work on. We will support your efforts in any way we can. For more information about this campaign, and our work, contact our offices.

\*\*\* Tomorrow: a description of the Reparations Campaign

Thank-you.

#### GENERAL INFORMATION:

E: [info@rightsaction.org](mailto:info@rightsaction.org)

W: [www.rightsaction.org](http://www.rightsaction.org)

#### CANADA:

Rights Action

Box 73527

509 St. Clair Ave W.

Toronto ON, M6C-1C0, Canada

Contact: Grahame Russell

T: 416-654-2074

E: [info@rightsaction.org](mailto:info@rightsaction.org)

#### UNITED STATES:

Rights Action

1830 Connecticut Ave. NW

Washington DC 20009 USA

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## "A PEOPLE DAMMED: THE CHIXOY DAM, GUATEMALAN MASSACRES AND THE WORLD BANK"

By Matt Pacenza. Published in the Multi-National Monitor, in 1997.

PACUX, Guatemala -- Manuel and Lucio would like to forget what happened to their village of Rio Negro in 1982. They are tired of the nightmares and headaches that accompany their memories. But the first sight that greets them each morning when they leave their huts -- the shimmering waters of the Chixoy Reservoir -- brings it all flooding back.

For Lucio, Manuel and other survivors of the 1982 Rio Negro massacres, the waters of the Chixoy [chee-SHOY] do not represent the "progress" -- cheap, bountiful and sustainable electricity -- that World Bank, [Inter-American Development Bank] and Guatemalan authorities promised them. Rather, they remember the destruction of family, land and livelihood that the project brought them. Water is not the only substance that they see each morning, for, in their eyes, "the Chixoy reservoir was built with the blood of our people."

The blood flowed heaviest on March 13, 1982. "I lost more than 80 family members that day," Lucio says. "I had a large family -- many aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, cousins, nieces and nephews. So many were killed. Today we are few."

Manuel was an eyewitness to that massacre. The Guatemalan Armed Forces and local civil defense patrol units forced him and nearly 200 Rio Negro women and children to gather together outside their homes in north-central Guatemala. Telling them that they were being brought to a "meeting," soldiers marched them several hours up a steep hill above their riverside community until they arrived at a place known as Pacoxom.

"There they began to rape the women, and to kill," remembers Manuel. "They killed them in so many ways," Lucio interjects. He watched the violence from a hiding place on a nearby hill. "Some were shot, others had their throats slit with a machete. Some were strangled, or beaten with rocks and rifle butts. They killed the children by smashing their heads against the rocks. Because their skulls were so tender, they died instantly."

Manuel says softly, "That's how one of the civil patrollers killed my younger brother. I was running after him, and watched him pick my brother up by the ankles and smash his head into a rock."

In total, the patrollers and soldiers killed 178 people in Rio Negro on March 13, 1982: 70 women, 107 children and an old man who was forced into a canvas sack and thrown off a cliff. In a series of massacres later that year, they killed hundreds more in Rio Negro and neighboring villages.

"What happened to Rio Negro in 1982 was so unjust," Lucio says, "but we were not innocent. We had committed many crimes: the crime of being indigenous, the crime of being Catholic, and most importantly the crime of being united, of working together to fight that cursed dam."

The "cursed dam" was part of the Chixoy Hydroelectric Project, a massive dam, reservoir and power station built by the Guatemala state electricity company (INDE) with funding and technical support from the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank. The village of Rio Negro stood in the path of the project.

### DEVELOPMENT DREAM OR NIGHTMARE?

The [Banks] counseled Guatemala that the Chixoy project would bring the poor Central American nation cheap, sustainable power. Soon after Guatemalan authorities announced their plans to build this "development dream," the World Bank promised \$72 million and the IDB \$105 million,

although adequate feasibility and social and environmental impact studies had not been conducted.

One example of the planning flaws that characterized the Chixoy project: neither INDE nor the [Banks] consulted the people that lived along the river to be flooded by the Chixoy dam. Almost two years after project construction began, in 1977, INDE officials flew by helicopter into the small village of Rio Negro to inform residents that they would need to abandon their homelands.

These Maya Achi people had maintained a rich cultural heritage along the fertile banks of the Rio Chixoy for hundreds of years. "Life was hard, but it was good," one elder remembers. "People were content. Everyone lived nearby, we all knew each other, and we lived peacefully."

Rio Negro villagers were angered by the abrupt announcement that they would soon need to leave their land. "Many people did not want to leave and stood up for their rights," Lucio remembers. He was a leader of a committee chosen by the community to negotiate with INDE. The people of Rio Negro drew upon a long history of collective organization -- community work, education and health projects promoted primarily by the Catholic Church -- to support their struggle with INDE.

INDE and the Rio Negro committee reached an agreement on a resettlement package in 1980. However, when the people of Rio Negro saw the rocky, marginal land that was supposed to sustain them in their new lives -- the farm of Pacux -- they refused to leave Rio Negro unless they were provided with basic resources needed -- fertile land and water -- to rebuild their lives.

Lucio recalls how INDE responded, "They told us, 'If you don't leave, we'll send the army to drive you out with bullets.' And that's what happened."

Violence first struck on March 4, 1980, when three INDE security officials arrived in the community to arrest several community members for stealing from a local store. "We told the soldiers to leave," one resident recalls. "They began shooting, killing seven of us, and then they attempted to flee. One escaped, the second we caught and later released and the third drowned in the river. For this, we were accused of murder."

In July 1980, two Rio Negro committee members went to meet with INDE officials at the dam site. They were carrying the community's only records of the resettlement and cash payment agreements that had been reached with INDE. Both men "disappeared." Their heavily tortured bodies were found a week later. The records were never recovered.

These acts of violence terrorized the people of Rio Negro, and peaceful efforts at negotiation broke down. Stubbornly, they remained on their land, hoping that a miracle would allow them to stay. Project construction continued and, by the start of 1982, was nearing completion. The people of Rio Negro were in the way, and that year they paid the price.

#### THE 1982 MASSACRES

The first massacre suffered by Rio Negro was on February 13, 1982. A local military commander ordered 74 men and women from Rio Negro to report to the nearby village of Xococ [show-COKE] for weapons training. Upon arrival, they were tortured, raped and murdered by the Xococ civil defense patrol, an involuntary civilian wing of the military employed to terrorize neighboring villages. One woman escaped, walked all night and arrived in Rio Negro the next day.

"She told us what had happened -- that our loved ones had been killed. Children were crying, asking for their parents. We were terrified," Lucio remembers.

Exactly one month after the Xococ massacre, the civil defense patrollers and Guatemalan soldiers arrived in Rio Negro. The men of the village were not present that day, because they had taken to the hills to hide. The women refused to go, fearing they and their children could not

survive, "living like animals in the mountains." One survivor recalls, "They thought it was only the men that the patrollers from Xococ wanted. That's what we all thought."

Witnesses to the massacre recount that the soldiers told the 177 women and children before they were killed that they were being punished for being "guerrillas." The World Bank backs this interpretation in several of its Chixoy documents, referring to "insurgency activity in the project area" as the cause of "resettlement problems."

A survivor of the massacre responds, "How can innocent women and children, many of them pregnant, be mistaken for guerrillas? They couldn't be. None of us were. We were peasants trying to make a living from the soil like our parents and our ancestors. I'll tell you the real reason for the violence: they wanted our land for their cursed reservoir and dam, and we were in the way."

Terrified, survivors of the February and March massacres abandoned Rio Negro and hid nearby. One group of 84 Rio Negro refugees was discovered and killed by soldiers and patrollers at Los Encuentros, five miles from Rio Negro, on May 14, 1982. Witnesses who worked at the nearby dam site in Pueblo Viejo assert that several hours prior to the massacre, soldiers stopped at the INDE office there, borrowed an INDE truck and drove to Los Encuentros to commit the massacre. After they had finished in Los Encuentros, the soldiers proceeded to Rio Negro, burning the abandoned village to the ground.

Four months later, on September 13, civil defense patrollers and soldiers killed 92 people in Agua Fria, another village near the dam site. The soldiers forced the victims into a community house, barred the door and machine gunned the house. When all were killed, the house was burned to the ground. Thirty-five of those killed were orphaned children from Rio Negro, whom the people of Agua Fria had taken into their homes.

In total, 369 Rio Negro villagers were murdered in 1982 [alone]. Survivors fled, and their village was destroyed. No one remained "in the way." The Chixoy Reservoir began to be filled in late 1982, and what remained of Rio Negro was soon underwater.

#### THE WORLD BANK AND THE MASSACRES

The World Bank was not only involved closely with INDE and the Chixoy Project prior to the violence, but granted an additional \$44.6 million loan three years later, in 1985. Bank documents approving the 1985 loan make almost no mention of the massacres associated with the Chixoy.

The April 1996 publication of a Witness for Peace report on the Chixoy Project violence ["a People Dammed"] has prompted public questioning of the Bank's role: What did Bank officials know about the massacres? And why did they continue to fund and support the project in 1985? [To get a copy of this report, written by Matt Pacenza, et.al., contact Witness for Peace: 202-588-1471, [witness@w4peace.org](mailto:witness@w4peace.org)]

World Bank President James Wolfensohn responded to these questions on June 18. In a letter to Witness for Peace and the International Rivers Network, Wolfensohn wrote that a preliminary investigation had found "no indication that Bank staff had any information ... that Rio Negro had been attacked in order to clear the way for the reservoir."

Guatemalan sources question the veracity of this claim. As one construction worker who was employed at the dam site from 1977 to 1982 says, "Everybody knew about the corruption and the violence." Guatemalans did not speak out, he says, because "we were all too terrified to say anything."

A Guatemalan journalist who investigated the issue adds, "The whole area was under siege. One of the heads of security at the project was responsible for orchestrating much of the bloodshed. His brother was a high ranking army official in the region at the time. There's no doubt that INDE

encouraged -- and benefited from -- the massacres." World Bank personnel worked in supervisory capacities with INDE officials at the Chixoy site regularly from 1979 to 1991. Bank documents even indicate that in 1984, the Bank hired "an expert on resettlement policy to assist in the [resettlement] supervision function."

One Bank official told Inter Press Service on condition of anonymity that the Bank did indeed know about the massacres as they were occurring, but claimed, "There was nothing we could do about it."

#### THE SURVIVORS TODAY

Lucio remembers his life after the terror of 1982: "We were forced to seek refuge wherever we could. We hid in the weeds and brush near the place where our village was destroyed. We couldn't cook, because if we lit a fire they would find us. We couldn't plant corn, because they would find our fields. So we ate whatever little thing we could find: roots, grass and raw fish. Some days we ate nothing. I, and 23 other people, lived that way for five years."

Survivors of the Rio Negro massacres assert that their life has improved little today. Most of them live in Pacux, the farm that INDE purchased for them as compensation for the lands they lost in Rio Negro. The rocky, bare soil in Pacux discourages planting, employment is limited and families struggle daily to earn enough cash to buy food. "We are like a tree that was violently uprooted and then hastily replanted in another place," Manuel says. "It is very difficult for that tree to grow again."

While Wolfensohn's June 18 letter recognizes that the Chixoy Project resettlement planning was "totally inadequate," it also asserts the Bank has since taken "corrective actions" in an "improved resettlement program."

The survivors of the massacres dispute this claim, and detail the many agreements that INDE has failed to fulfill: adequate and fertile land, titles to houses and land, a potable water supply and cash payments for lost crops.

A local Catholic priest sees these broken promises as a continuation of the violence for the people of Rio Negro. "For more than 15 years, the people have suffered, far from their community, far from the land that has given them food, without the bare necessities of life," he says.

The economic track record of the Chixoy Hydroelectric Project demonstrates the breadth of its failure. The project has never produced more than 70 percent of capacity. Cost overruns inflated the price tag from \$270 million to \$1.2 billion. And, because of a failure to conduct studies which would have predicted that the erosion of the Chixoy Basin's badly denuded hillsides would result in reservoir siltation that will soon shut down the power turbines, recent estimates predict that the Chixoy will cease to produce electricity in 20 years, far sooner than the 200-year project life the World Bank estimated.

Such clear indicators have forced INDE and the World Bank to admit the project was a bad idea. In 1987, an INDE president described the Chixoy as "a financial disaster ... which never should have been built." The World Bank in 1991 stated that the Chixoy "had proved to be an unwise and uneconomic investment" and Wolfensohn in his June 18 letter acknowledges that "this was a very weak project on technical and economic grounds."

#### A FIGHT FOR THE FUTURE

The World Bank's public response to the recent questioning of its support of the disastrous Chixoy Hydroelectric Project has been that it has turned over a new leaf. Wolfensohn wrote on June 18 that the "emphasis now needs to be on the future."

Lucio and Manuel of Rio Negro agree. Each day they focus on the future, as they struggle to determine how they can provide for their families. However, they also continue to remember the past, through the violent nightmares that haunt their nights as well as through the many ways in which the project has shattered their dreams and made day-to-day survival a challenge.

Lucio wants the World Bank to know about their continued suffering, and asks "that they find a solution, an immediate solution, because it happened over 10 years ago, and all that was promised hasn't been fulfilled ... We from Rio Negro continue to suffer."

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