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SEARCHING FOR THE LOST AND DISAPPEARED CHILDREN OF GUATEMALA

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RIGHTS ACTION COMMENTARY

Despite on-going repression and impoverishment in Guatemala, and despite *ibusiness as usual* relations between the USA, Canada, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, global companies and banks, etc, and the dominant economic and military sectors in Guatemala, there are extraordinary efforts to have justice done for the crimes and genocide of the past.

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Searching for the lost and disappeared children of Guatemala
by Aaron Bates (*)

It has been six years since the official end of Guatemala's 36 years of state repression and genocide. More than 20 years have passed since the military massacres and calculated acts of state terrorism tore apart Maya Achi communities in the area of Rabinal, department of Baja Verapaz. Today, widows and massacre survivors are beginning the search for children and grandchildren lost or disappeared during the conflict.

ADIVIMA, the Association for Integral Development of the Victims of Violence in the Verapaz Departments, is a grass roots organization located in Rabinal. It works to dignify the memory of those people killed during the years of *violence*, to seek justice for the crimes against humanity of the past, and to provide social and economic opportunities for surviving victims.

As part of this work, ADIVIMA is working with the National Commission for the Search for Disappeared Children, to locate and identify children who were kidnapped and disappeared, or adopted during the years of repression and genocide. In 1999, a United Nations Truth Commission concluded that over 200,000 people (mainly Mayan) were massacred or disappeared, close to 1.5 million were displaced from their homes and communities, and that hundreds of thousands of children were orphaned. The Truth Commission found that the Guatemalan regime (then as now fully backed by the USA, other western countries,

the World Bank, global companies and banks) carried out genocide in Mayan regions of the country, including Rabinal.

On November 14, 2002, a group of 40 widows from the Rabinal area, along with ADIVIMA and representatives from the National Commission for the Search for Disappeared Children, arrived at the well-groomed doorsteps of Zona Militar 21, a military base near the city of Cobán in Guatemala's northern highlands. As a sign of how some things have changed since the signing of the Peace Accords of 1996, the current commanders of Zona Militar 21 agreed to meet with ADIVIMA and survivors from the Rabinal area.

Upon entering the base, one is greeted by a plaque, graced by crossed American and Guatemalan flags, commemorating the deaths of Guatemalan and American Air Force pilots who were killed during joint military exercises.

During the meeting, the Rabinal massacre survivors presented a petition to the base commanders, stating that they witnessed the kidnapping of 44 people, mostly children but also women and elderly, by a military helicopter from the Zona Militar 21, during the Los Encuentros massacre of Rio Negro villagers that occurred on May 14, 1982. Forty others were killed that day by the soldiers and paramilitaries.

It is a positive sign that some of Guatemala's least powerful citizens now have the social power to confront an institution that at one point did its best to destroy them. However, a sign of how little some things have changed in Guatemala is the way the commanders responded to the petition. Many bad things happened during the war, they stated. This is the unfortunate nature of warfare. The modern military, they continued, is doing its best to work with the people. And on and on.

The families left the base with nothing more than a vague promise that the military would search its files (which it claims are destroyed every three years) for information regarding the Los Encuentros massacre. However, the survivors also left with the knowledge that they had met with their former oppressors and told their stories to those who kidnapped their children and tortured their families.

During the years of violence, certain members of the Catholic Church were actively (and courageously) involved with sheltering children orphaned by the massacres and children born to mothers who were raped, rape having been a widespread form of repression used by the Army and paramilitaries. Massacre survivors, along with ADIVIMA and representatives from the National Commission for the Search for Disappeared Children met with Catholic sisters in the northern town of Cantabul, and in the community of Pacux, near Rabinal.

In Pacux (where survivors of the 1982 Rio Negro massacres now live), a Catholic Sister -- who had worked with orphaned children in the Rabinal area during the conflict -- brought testimonies and photos of 32 children adopted by families in Ireland, Norway and Sweden. During this meeting, four children from the surrounding villages of Canch'in, Chichupac and Chuategu., as well as from Pacux were tentatively identified by family members. Three of these children had been held captive by the military, while the fourth was given to the Catholic Church, as the mother was raped by a member of the military.

Identifying lost children (these children are now all adults in their 20ís) is not a first step in reuniting families. Potential reunion of these families is a complex and heart-wrenching process, in the best case scenario. The lives led by these young adults in Europe are as different from their families in rural Guatemala as is possible to imagine. They speak English, Norwegian and Swedish. Their biological families speak the Mayan language of Achi, and perhaps Spanish as a second language. As of yet, only 12 of the 32 children have consented to have their biological families contact them. It is likely that few of the children have much knowledge of the extent of repression and genocide that occurred to their home communities when they were infants.

Given these conditions, some might question if the search for children disappeared and lost over 20 years ago is worth it. What is the value of having painful meetings with disdainful, often racist military officials regarding a mass kidnapping when all that is offered in response is recycled rhetoric? What is the value of searching for children adopted by European families with the knowledge that your child does not speak your language, knows nothing of your culture and may not have given consent to be contacted?

Clearly though, the meetings and this process are crucial for the surviving family members, still living in poverty and facing racism, who often walk half a day from their isolated communities to reach meetings. It is the process of re-building their torn and dispersed families and communities that is important for those who have had so much taken away from them.

During the meetings women have stood up and told, usually for the first time, their stories with the knowledge that others were interested in what they had to say. Many wept while describing why they desperately had to turn their children over to the church. More wept while speaking of how their children were kidnapped and lifted away by a military helicopter before their eyes. For perhaps the first time in their lives, these women were able to speak openly about their experiences and suffering. Healing old wounds can take many forms, and knowing that others are compassionately listening is one of them.

For Carlos Chen Osorio, himself a survivor of the March 13, 1982 Rio Negro massacre (where he lost his pregnant wife and two young children) and head of ADIVIMA's Human Rights division, the process is important because we are talking about our families, because these people may be able to find out if their children are alive.

Individual and community healing is the crucial first step to the community re-building and economic development work that ADIVIMA also carries out. Meetings of this sort are an essential part of the healing process. For all the value that lies in confronting your oppressors, in speaking openly and humanly of your loss, and in identifying and locating lost children, these people remain poor and marginalized; they remain uncompensated for the tremendous losses they suffered during Guatemala's 36 years of conflict, repression and genocide. However small human rights victories might appear - often invisible, immeasurable steps - these efforts and encounters are hugely important victories in the path towards healing, re-building and justice.

(*) Aaron Bates is a Canadian International Development Agency youth intern working with ADIVIMA in Rabinal, Guatemala. The CIDA internship programme in Rabinal is jointly administered by Rights Action, the Tatamagouche Centre, and the Maritimes Breaking the Silence network. He can be reached at aaron.bates@ziplip.com.

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