

CHIXOY DAM MASSACRE SURVIVORS versus GLOBAL IMPUNITY

This article is about the Chixoy Dam Reparations Campaign led by Maya-Achi campesinos in Guatemala, against the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank

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By Grahame Russell, September 13, 2004

On September 7th in Guatemala, 3000 mainly Mayan-Achi campesinos arrived by bus, boat and on foot, and took control of the Chixoy hydro-electric dam, a huge development project funded and supervised by the World Bank (WB) and Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), 1975-1985.

Forty hours later, the campesinos withdrew from the site in an orderly, peaceful fashion, just as they had occupied it. For now, they accept that the government of Guatemala, the WB and IDB have formally agreed (22 years later!) to assess the extent of loss of life, land and community, and the destruction of home, crops, animals and other property, that occurred in the context of violently and forcibly moving thousands of Mayan-Achi people from dozens of isolated communities to make way for the Chixoy dam.

In 1982, some 450 members of the Rio Negro community (with over 700 years of ancestral history along the river) were selectively assassinated or killed in a series of massacres. For the survivors, February 13, March 13, May 14 and September 14 of 1982 were days of massacres and complete destruction that will never be forgotten.

They never forgot their murdered loved ones. Now, after exhuming the mass graves where their loved one's bodies were dumped, and properly re-burying them with Mayan and Christian ceremonies, the Achi people of the Rio Negro river basin are taking strength from their properly buried loved ones and their ancestors, and are seeking truth, justice and complete reparations from the Guatemalan government, WB, IDB, and the major investor countries in the two "development" banks (USA, Britain, Germany, Japan, France, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico and Venezuela).

What were the investor countries, WB and IDB thinking when they spear-headed the Chixoy dam project in partnership with a US-backed regime that killed and disappeared over 200,000 people? For the banks, "development" is usually a business equation. The Chixoy dam was a sound investment; the Guatemalan government fully paid back the loans.

For the local communities, and particularly the village of Rio Negro, this imposed "development" project was a horrendous, global crime: massacres, community destruction, robbery of animals and tools, survivors fleeing into the mountains, further death by hunger and disease in the mountains, no real compensation, and certainly no reparations or justice since that time.

Yet, here they are. After 10 years of courageous development and re-building work, including locating all the displaced communities and people, the surviving victims are protagonists in this campaign for justice and reparations.

It is not easy. A majority of survivors live in endemic conditions of poverty and discrimination. Many suffer on-going trauma due to the massacres. Community leaders are targets of on-going threats and repression.

It is not easy. Not only has the government done nothing to acknowledge, assess and repair the loss of life and destruction, but neither have the WB, IDB nor the major investor countries who contributed directly or indirectly, with impunity, to the death and destruction.

OJ K'ASLIK

The affected communities need financial support, human rights accompaniment and global solidarity action. In the Rabinal community museum, one can watch a documentary concerning the repression and genocide of the 1980s, and concerning 500 years of discrimination, exploitation and repression. The video is called Oj K'Aslik, which means in Achi "We are alive".

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Grahame Russell works with Rights Action, a tax-charitable organization in the USA and Canada, that funds community development, humanitarian relief and human rights projects in Guatemala, Chiapas (Mexico), Honduras, Costa Rica, Peru and Nicaragua. Since 1995, Rights Action has worked extensively in the Rabinal region with the displaced communities of this Chixoy Dam project. If you would like to support this work or get involved: 416-654-2074, info@rightsaction.org.