

Rights Action - December 6, 2011

GUATEMALA - Freedom for Ramiro Choc, a Political Prisoner in Guatemalan Jails

RALLY: Guatemalan Embassy, 12:30pm, Thursday, December 8, 2011, 2220 R Street NW, Washington DC

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THE RALLY

Palmer Legare (palmerlegare@yahoo.com), of the Guatemala Solidarity Project, writes:

On Thursday, December 8, 2011, we will gather at the Guatemalan Embassy to call for the release of political prisoner and Q'eqchi' peasant leader Ramiro Choc and an end to the repression of indigenous and peasant communities and leaders.

Ramiro Choc's incarceration is part of endemic violent and systematic repression that is causing increasing hunger, extreme poverty and conflict in Guatemala.

We call for an end to this repression and ask that people of conscience join us at the Guatemalan embassy at 2220 R Street, NW, Washington DC, at 12:30 on December 8. Some people will gather at 11:45 at McPherson Square to walk to the embassy. If you can't be there in person, please call the embassy the same day at (202) 745-4952 and ask that they work to free Ramiro Choc and end the repression of indigenous and peasant communities!

SPONSORS INCLUDE: Guatemala Solidarity Project, Guatemala Human Rights Commission, Rights Action, School of the Americas Watch.

WHO IS RAMIRO CHOC?

Ramiro Choc is a Q'eqchi' peasant leader from northeastern Guatemala. With courage, dynamic organizing skills and commitment to social and environmental justice he has been a leader in numerous successful grassroots struggles.

Choc was born in extreme poverty in a plantation within the municipality of El Estor, Izabal. His parents had been born slaves. At age 17 he became a catechist for the Catholic Church, teaching a liberation theology that people should not only have justice after death in heaven but also during life on earth. This ideology brought him great support among the peasant population but not among all of the church hierarchy.

After nearly thirteen years as a catechist, the gap between Choc's liberation theology and the conservative doctrine of many of his superiors became too large. Choc was then hired by the National Indigenous and Peasant Coordinating Committee (CONIC) as an organizer, working primarily with indigenous communities involved in land struggles.

With CONIC, Choc earned a reputation for his firm defense of the rights of indigenous communities. After approximately seven years, he left CONIC and

helped form a new organization, Encuentro Campesino (Peasant Encounter/Gathering).

Through Encuentro Campesino Choc continued to have success in organizing indigenous Q'eqchi' communities in support of their rights. He worked not only with Q'eqchi' communities but also with ladino (of Spanish descent) and Garifuna (of African descent) peasants. His ability to unite diverse marginalized communities in defense of their rights grew to threaten the dominance of the government and wealthy landowners who looked for an opportunity to silence him.

After surviving numerous assassination attempts, on February 12, 2008, Choc was kidnapped by members of the military. He was taken to a secluded location for five days, and then sentenced to six to eight years in prison in a farcical trial.

THE "CASE" AGAINST RAMIRO

Ramiro Choc was convicted of occupying and stealing land, aggravated robbery, and illegal detention. The government lacked the evidence to prove their case in court, and the charges are clearly based on Choc's political activism.

The government claims that in late 2007, in the community of Barrio Buena Vista la Esperanza, Choc detained a group of police and stole their weapons. But the government's own evidence corroborates the fact that Choc wasn't in the area when the confrontation took place.

That morning, armed men attacked the community of Bella Vista, shooting at unarmed villagers, both men and children. The armed aggressors were employed by Ileana Lemus Solórzano de Castellán, a wealthy woman with strong government ties. Castellán ordered the attack in an attempt to steal land from the community.

The community was able to detain the attackers, and the government unsuccessfully attempted to negotiate their release. Eventually the Governor contacted Choc, a well known mediator, and requested that he come to help resolve the situation as a negotiator. Hours later Choc arrived, and he successfully negotiated a nonviolent end to the crisis. He signed the final agreement between representatives of the community and the government, which the prosecution uses as proof that it was he who detained the men. But the same agreement was signed by the mayor, governor, representatives of neighboring communities and representatives of numerous government institutions. Instead of being thanked for mediating a nonviolent solution to a violent conflict - he was arrested and is sleeping on a cement floor in prison.

As mentioned above, in 2008, months after the attack on Bella Vista, Choc was dragged off a public bus by soldiers who told him they would kill him. They took him to a secluded location, and only after news of his kidnapping had reached the outside did they say they had decided not to execute him. After five days, Choc was taken to court. Since being imprisoned, Choc has suffered beatings, poisoned food, and then months in isolation.

As national and international pressure continued to build against the government, Choc was transferred out of isolation and into Sector 12 of Guatemala City's Zone 18 Jail. Then in late 2011, Choc was transferred to Guatemala's notorious Pavon Prison. Pavon is famous in Guatemala as the home of assassinations and massacres of prisoners. On numerous occasions, prisoners in cases connected to government corruption have been transferred to the prison and

executed while there. Shortly after Choc's transfer, the director of the Pavon Prison told Choc's lawyer and an international solidarity activist that it would be easy to order Choc's murder.

RAMIRO CHOC'S IMPRISONMENT AND REPRESSION AGAINST PEASANT AND INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Choc was sentenced to 6 to 8 years, which under Guatemalan law meant that he was eligible for conditional release for good behavior after three years. However, the government has refused to follow the law and allow his release.

February 14, 2011 marked the first day that Choc became eligible for release.

Indigenous leaders and solidarity activists planned to hold nonviolent actions on that day to demand Ramiro's freedom. But on February 12, three Encuentro Campesino leaders, close friends of Ramiro who had recently visited him, disappeared. Their bodies were found on February 14, floating in a large body of water near the Caribbean Coast. They had been shot dozens of times.

Choc's imprisonment and the February 12 massacre of his friends and fellow indigenous leaders are part of the systematic repression of indigenous and peasant communities in Guatemala. Choc has courageously stood up to this repression and continues to speak out while in prison despite the great threat. Many other indigenous leaders who have visited Ramiro have been assassinated, in addition to the three young leaders who were killed earlier this year.

For example, on March 15, 2008, Choc's close friend and well respected peasant leader Mario Caal Bolom was murdered. The government's own human rights ombudsman's office concluded that he had been tortured and murdered by the police.

On September 27, 2009, Choc's brother-in-law Adolfo Ich Xaman, another committed indigenous leader, was brutally murdered and mutilated by the private security of a multinational corporation.

The assassinations of Choc's friends, like his imprisonment, are part of the government's criminalization of indigenous and peasant human rights defenders. This repression seeks to silence indigenous and peasant communities so that the government can continue its almost daily violent "evictions" of indigenous and peasant communities. These attacks are carried out by soldiers, police, private security and paramilitaries. The purpose is to remove communities from their ancestral lands so that private individuals and corporations can profit from Guatemala's rich natural resources.

These "evictions" usually include the burning of peasant homes and crops. Most indigenous communities in Guatemala rely on subsistence agriculture to survive. The evictions leave families facing hunger and a desperate struggle for survival.

For example, in March, 2011 in Panzos, in northeast Guatemala, government and private security forces "evicted" 15 communities and destroyed over 1,000 acres of corn and other basic grains.

The corn was nearing harvest, and the indigenous communities that had planted and worked the fields were anxiously waiting the food it would provide. They were poor, but they were not starving. After the evictions, hundreds of families were left homeless and without food. Numerous community leaders were

shot, imprisoned and/or murdered. Several people from the communities have since starved to death, and thousands are suffering the effects of chronic malnutrition, such as stunted development, low energy and high susceptibility to illness. The land that they and their ancestors lived on is now being used to grow sugarcane and African palm for the production of biofuels.

In many parts of Guatemala, communities that were not rich but were at least void of starvation are now in a hunger crisis. This is in large part the result of the Central American Free Trade Agreement, the US Army School of the Americas, and other types of US-supported "economic development" and "security cooperation" which have been on the rise since the signing of the Peace Accords.

Ramiro Choc is a courageous leader whose only "crime" is eloquently speaking out against this violent pillaging of indigenous lands. We call for his immediate release, and for the end of government repression of indigenous and peasant communities.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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202-735-9165

TO MAKE TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS

for humanitarian relief funds for Ramiro Choc, and for Mayan Qeqchi communities struggling for justice, land and human rights, make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

UNITED STATES: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887

CANADA: 552 - 351 Queen St. E, Toronto ON, M5A-1T8

CREDIT-CARD DONATIONS: www.rightsaction.org

In Canada: <https://www.canadahelps.org/DonationDetails.aspx?cookieCheck=true>

In USA: <https://npo.networkforgood.org/Donate/Donate.aspx?npoSubscriptionId=488>

FOR DONATION OF STOCK: Stock donations can be done anonymously. Have your stockbroker contact info@rightsaction.org

DELEGATIONS TO GUATEMALA AND/OR HONDURAS

1- HONDURAS, JANUARY 6-15, 2012, "ACCOMPANIMENT & FOOD SOVEREIGNTY DELEGATION"
Sponsored by the Alliance for Global Justice, join AfGJ Coordinator Chuck Kaufman, Karen Spring (long-time Honduras human rights accompanier with Rights Action) and Tanya Kerksen (food policy analyst from Food First). For an application: AFGJ@AFGJ.org

2- HONDURAS & GUATEMALA, JANUARY 2012, "MINING, BIOFUELS & MILITARIZATION: US MILITARY AID & CANADIAN-AMERICAN ECONOMIC INTERESTS"
Sponsored by Rights Action, join Annie Bird (Rights Action co-director). For information: annie@rightsaction.org, 202-680-3002

3- GUATEMALA, MARCH 10-17, 2012, "DAMS, MINING & AFRICAN PALM PRODUCTION - versus-- COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE & HUMAN RIGHTS"
Sponsored by Rights Action, join Grahame Russell (Rights Action co-director). For information: info@rightsaction.org, 860-352-2448

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