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Rights Action

MASS GRAVE EXHUMATIONS IN GUATEMALA – 21 YEARS OF DIGGING, AND COUNTING!

2013 will be a good year to work and struggle for life in harmony with Mother Earth, based on equality and mutual respect. And it will be a hard year.

GUATEMALA: The political situation in Guatemala remains profoundly undemocratic, dominated for the most part by the same economic elites, in conjunction with the repressive military and police forces that have dominated and abused Guatemala almost uninterrupted since the US-backed military coup in 1954.

Courageous work for truth, memory, justice: Below, two articles about the amazing “exhumation process” in Guatemala, that began in 1992! Since 1994, Rights Action has been honoured to fund and otherwise support the exhumation of mass graves, the re-burial of loved ones, the building of commemorative monuments, and work for individual and collective justice.

GUATEMALA’S ‘LITTLE SCHOOL OF THE AMERICAS’

by Dawn Paley, 19 November 2012

<http://upsidedownworld.org/main/guatemala-archives-33/3976-guatemalas-little-school-of-the-americas>

COBAN, GUATEMALA — Since February, forensic anthropologists have turned up over 400 skeletons at a military base in Coban, Guatemala, in what has fast become one of the largest discoveries of a clandestine mass grave in the country. During the country’s 36 year long internal armed conflict that led to acts of genocide, the base at Coban was a center of military coordination and intelligence.

But what sets this dig apart is that it is taking place at a military base that remains active today: foreign military and police arrive regularly at the base to train troops from Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic. [1] In 2006, the military zone in Coban was renamed CREOMPAZ, which stands for Regional Training Command for Peacekeeping Operations.

The horrid history of the military base in Coban — and the impunity with which mass killings of men, women and children were carried out — provides a disturbing backdrop for present day “peacekeeping” operations.

Evidence of the ongoing excavation is all over Guatemala’s capital city, in the form of ads gracing billboards and bus stops. On the right hand side of the ad is a stock photo of a woman in a surgical mask, looking at a medical instrument. In Los Angeles, it might be a weight loss ad, in Houston, promotion for a private hospital. Not here. Instead, text across the top reads: “Do you have a family member disappeared between 1940 and 1996?” Then, “with DNA we are identifying them. A spit sample is enough.”

The Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala (FAFG) put the ad campaign together in attempt to identify the skeletons of the disappeared by matching them with DNA from their living family members. FAFG anthropologists are at work around Guatemala, digging, dusting, recording and finally exhuming human remains.

CREOMPAZ is one of the largest current excavations.

“We have a few more than 400 trenches, where we’ve found I think 60 graves, and we’ve found 436 skeletons, mostly men, like everywhere else, but there’s also women, and what’s particular to CREOMPAZ is that there are also many children,” said José Suasnavar, the executive sub-director of

FAFG, during an interview in Guatemala City in October. FAFG is the only group in Guatemala dedicated to identifying the estimated 50,000 disappeared during the country's internal armed conflict.

Most of the dead found at CREOMPAZ are believed to be people who disappeared from communities around the country. Men and women kidnapped by the army on their way to the shop to buy some food for their children, people who said goodbye to their families one morning and headed off to school or to work, never to be heard from again. Evidence uncovered by forensic anthropologists shows that people disappeared from various regions were later brought to the base at Coban by soldiers for interrogation and torture, followed by extrajudicial execution and secret burial.

The exhumations at CREOMPAZ call up scenes of terror.

"What is radically different about this military base...is that here there is up to 62 people buried in one single grave, representing a single event," said Sausnavar.

There are few bullet wounds among the dead, according to Sausnavar. Most of the skeletons still show evidence of being bound, and many reveal bones that had been broken, healed and re-broken, indicating that the dead had been tortured and interrogated, some for lengthy periods of time, before they were killed and thrown in the pits.

The dig in Coban is revealing the gruesome reality of the country's internal armed conflict, where people labeled subversives—political and student activists, Indigenous leaders and community members, and others— were kidnapped and tortured en masse. Children were also murdered before being dumped in clandestine graves at the base. All of this took place within the protective confines of a military controlled area.

Of the 28 former military areas the FAFG has dug since 1996, 24 have turned up bodies. Some of those digs are still works in progress, while more military bases, zones and detachments remain to be investigated. The dig at CREOMPAZ has turned up by far the largest number of corpses of any base.

"When the peace accords were signed, many military bases or detachments were reduced and closed. But the military remained here the whole time," said Suasnavar of the base at Coban. "They say to us 'we didn't know that that happened, it was another time, it was other people, but you found it so there's no other option than to keep working,' right, those have been the words that they use with respect to our findings. But the continuity in the structure and function and the territorial control of this location has been strictly military."

Regardless of the mass graves at the base, military and police training continues there, supported by countries like the US and Canada.

"The facilities have a sort of rank as a military organization of the United Nations, in fact the Guatemalan soldiers and officials that are based there wear the distinctive blue helmets," said Iduvina Hernández Batres from the Guatemala City based organization Security and Democracy (Sedem). "This is happening, and this unit exists there, regardless of the fact that this property has been documented to have constituted an enormous clandestine cemetery."

In 2011, the Ottawa-based Pearson Centre carried out a workshop at CREOMPAZ about "police and military cooperation in peace operations." [2] Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and the US Southern Command jointly funded the event. Soldiers trained at CREOMPAZ have been deployed as part of UN missions in Haiti and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

For some, like Ka'koj Ba Tiul, a Maya Poqomchi' anthropologist and professor, CREOMPAZ has received an unwarranted facelift by rebranding the military base as a peacekeeping center. "It is a school of assassins. The hidden side is the training of teams of military counterintelligence," said Ba Tiul, who calls CREOMPAZ "the little School of the Americas."

“There are instructors from Argentina, instructors from Chile, instructors from Colombia, instructors from North America, and instructors from Israel,” said Ba Tiul in an interview at his home just over a dozen kilometers from the base. “It is where they are training all of those who will form part of the modern counterinsurgency model for Guatemala and Central America.”

[Dawn Paley is a freelance journalist. See more of her work at her website, dawnpaley.ca. Images by James Rodríguez. See more of his work at mimundo.org.]

[1] <http://www.canadainternational.gc.ca/guatemala/development-developpement/start.aspx?lang=eng&view=d>

[2] <http://www.pearsoncentre.org/article5#.UKUaTOOe-A0>

448 BODIES AND COUNTING AT COBÁN'S FORMER MILITARY GARRISON

By Erica Henderson and Catherine Nolin

16 November 2012

448 human remains in 64 graves. That is the body count shared by Fredy Peccerelli, Executive Director of the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (FAFG), at the recent Congress of Latin American Forensic Anthropology (ALAF) in Antigua, Guatemala.

On February 27, 2012, the FAFG began exhumations of mass graves within the CREOMPAZ Regional Training Center for Peace Keeping and United Nations Operations, formally known as Military Base No. 21. Three months later, the FAFG team met our UNBC/ Rights Action delegation of undergraduate and graduate students accompanied by photographer James Rodríguez of MiMundo.org, co-led by Dr. Catherine Nolin and Grahame Russell, at the Cobán CREOMPAZ excavation.

We obtained Public Ministry clearance for access to the former military garrison and only James Rodríguez was permitted to take photographs: <http://www.mimundo.org/2012/06/13/2012-05-exhumation-inside-cobans-former-military-garrison/>. Representatives of the Public Ministry's Attorney General and the Guatemalan Army's legal department monitor the site, as well as other curious military trainees.

In late May 2012, 65 women and children were exhumed from one grave wearing traditional clothing and necklaces from the Mayan Achí region of Rabinal. The FAFG hypothesizes that the remains belong to the victims of the May 14, 1982, Los Encuentros massacre [one of the four Chixoy Dam / Rio Negro massacres].

Other graves contain male remains; some with blindfolds, some with their hands and feet tied, some without clothing.

As a delegation, we visited these exhumation sites to witness the State-directed destruction of communities and to support the FAFG's search for memory, truth and justice.

The exhumation continues. Fredy Peccerelli and the team cannot even speculate when their work at this site will be complete.

Please contact us, for more information about our research poster prepared for the Canadian Association of Physical Anthropology (CAPA) 2012 conference in Victoria, BC - Covered eyes, hands tied: Reflections and exhumations at the CREOMPAZ Former Military Garrison, Cobán, Guatemala.

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GET INFORMED / GET INVOLVED IN 2013

This is a great year – as good as any! - to get involved with good and vibrant struggle and work for life in harmony with Mother Earth, based on equality and mutual respect.

The roots of Rights Action's work go back to 1983. Since then, and particularly since 1995, Rights Action has been funding grassroots organizations working for community development and the environment, for disaster relief, for truth, memory, justice and human rights, and for democracy and peaceful resolution of conflicts in Guatemala and Honduras, as well as in southern Mexico and El Salvador. The Canadian Rights Action Foundation (CRAF), founded in 1999, is independent from Rights Action (USA). Since 1995, Grahame Russell and Annie Bird have been co-directors of Rights Action; Grahame is director of CRAF.

SPEAKERS: Contact us to plan educational presentations in your community

JOIN A DELEGATION: Form your own group or join one of our delegation seminars to Guatemala and Honduras to learn first hand about community development, human rights and environmental struggles

BALANCED DAILY NEWS SOURCES: www.democracynow.org / www.therealnews.com / www.upsidedownworld.org / www.dominionpaper.ca / www.rabble.ca / www.fsrn.org /

GOOD READING: Eduardo Galeano "Open Veins of Latin America" / Howard Zinn "A People's History of the United States" / James Loewen "Lies My Teacher Told Me" / Ronald Wright "Stolen Continents" / Naomi Klein "The Shock Doctrine" / Dr Seuss's "Horton Hears A Who" /

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