

Rights Action
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Guatemala: The World Bank, a Hydroelectric Dam, and Massacres

By Grahame Russell

- Original, with photos: <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/opinion/Guatemala-The-World-Bank-a-Hydroelectric-Dam-and-Massacres-20150416-0018.html>



(The World Bank and IDB profited from genocide in Guatemala. This cross still stands at site of the 2nd of 4 large-scale Chixoy Dam massacres committed against the village of Rio Negro. Photo @ Grahame Russell)

It is hard to imagine how the Chixoy Hydroelectric Dam project funded by the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) could have been more deadly and destructive, and not to mention profitable for both Banks.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Central America was in flames. In the name of “fighting communism,” the United States was funding, arming, training and directly fighting alongside brutal military regimes in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, while doing the same with the ‘Contra’ paramilitary group trying to overthrow the Sandinista government of Nicaragua.

From the 1960s-1990s, and most particularly from 1975-1985, close to 500,000 people – mainly civilians – were killed in these four countries.

During the very worst years of this U.S. Cold War repression, the World Bank and IDB chose to partner with the genocidal regimes of Generals Fernando Romeo Lucas Garcia and Efraín Ríos Montt (1978-1983) and invested close to US\$1 billion in the construction of the Chixoy Dam with the intent of “bringing development” to Guatemala.

Not surprisingly, the project was marked by murder, massive repression and forced evictions. Thirty-two Mayan communities – 25 up-river from the Dam wall and 7 down-river – were illegally displaced to make way for the Dam. One community in particular – Rio Negro – was completely massacred.

Since the mid-1970s, the people of Rio Negro had peacefully opposed being illegally evicted from their community and lands.

The roots of Rio Negro, and of numerous Mayan villages along the Chixoy River, go back over 1,000 years. Other communities slated to be evicted to make way for the construction of the Dam wall and the filling of the flood basin took their lead from Rio Negro.

From 1975 into the early 1980s, while the Banks and the Guatemalan military regimes were “negotiating” relocation and resettlement with the communities, they were actually proceeding with the construction of the Dam wall, a 25-kilometer water tunnel, and the electrical generation plant. By 1982, construction was nearing completion, while no community had accepted the “relocation and resettlement plans” being “offered.”

This is what repression is for. In 1982, Guatemalan soldiers and civil defense patrollers carried out four large-scale massacres against Rio Negro villagers: in Xococ (February), in Rio Negro itself (March), in Los Encuentros (May), and in Agua Fria (September). Over 440 women, men, and children were slaughtered: some were shot; some were burned to death; many were clubbed, stabbed and strangled; young women and girls were raped, before being massacred; infants were grabbed by the feet and smashed against boulders.

After the four Chixoy Dam/ Rio Negro massacres, the other communities “agreed” to move. The massacres were the “relocation.”

The dam wall was completed in early 1983, and soon after the flood basin was filled. Project complete, file closed

33 Years of Suffering and Survival, Dignity, Courage and Struggle

Both Banks hoped the truth about how the Chixoy Dam project was carried out would never become public. And for 11 years it didn't.

Then, in 1993, the first Chixoy Dam/Rio Negro massacre mass grave was exhumed by the EAFG (the original Guatemalan exhumation team), high on a mountain ridge

above the former village of Rio Negro that had been burned to the ground during the massacres, and most of which was now under the water of the Dam flood basin.

The courageous struggle for truth, justice and reparations had begun. It continues today.

Massacre survivors formed their own organizations (Association of Mayan Achi Victims - ADIVIMA, Bufete Juridico Popular, Campesino Association of Río Negro, March 13 - ASCRA, COCAHICH) to tell the truth about and demand justice for the genocide against the Maya Achi people, for particular massacres and political crimes, and for the evictions and massacres caused by the Chixoy Dam.

They built partnerships with U.S. and Canadian human rights groups, acknowledging that the genocide and repression in general and the Chixoy Dam death and destruction were caused significantly by the U.S. and Canadian governments and by the U.S.-based World Bank and IDB.

Beginning in 1995, multiple political and legal advocacy strategies were used in Guatemala and internationally that included: media and film reporting; speaking tours; protests in Guatemala and in front of the World Bank and IDB headquarters in Washington, D.C.; and participation in conferences (including the 2000 World Commission on Dams).

Over the years, the leaders of the struggle – most of them survivors of the Chixoy Dam massacres – were targeted for further repression, including illegal detentions and threats. All along, thousands of families harmed by the project have continued to live in chronic conditions of poverty, landlessness, joblessness, violence and impunity.

Denial, Impunity, and Immunity

Ever since the first advocacy meetings with the Banks in Washington, D.C., in 1995, the IDB and World Bank have easily deflected all calls for accountability by claiming that they complied with all aspects of the project and that they had no knowledge of, or any link to, harms and violations caused by the project.

The ability of the Banks to avoid accountability is intentional. They have immunity from legal accountability in the United States, where they are headquartered, as well as around the world where they invest in and profit from “development” projects. This immunity is provided to them by the investor nations that make up the directorship of the Banks - led by the U.S. government.

The Reparations Plan

Even as the IDB and World Bank avoided accountability, the victims, spearheaded by Coordinator of Chixoy Dam Harmed Communities, or COCAHICH, pushed ahead courageously and relentlessly. Their decades-long struggle resulted in the establishment of a negotiation process in 2005 with the Guatemalan government, mediated by the Organization of American States.

After five long years later of overcoming deceit and obstacles, on April 18, 2010, the government accepted responsibility for the harms and violations caused by the Chixoy Dam and agreed upon a \$1.54 million “reparations plan for damages suffered by the communities affected by the construction of the Chixoy hydroelectric dam in Guatemala.”

And then, after four more long years (of deceit and obstacles), former Army general, alleged war criminal, and now President Otto Perez Molina stood on Nov. 8, 2014, before thousands of victims in Rabinal, apologized on behalf of the government for the violations and sufferings caused by the Dam, and signed into law Decree #378-2014 – “the Public Policy of Reparations for Communities Affected by the Construction of the Chixoy hydroelectric dam project.”

As of the writing of this article, none of the stipulated funds have been released, neither for individual family compensation, nor for community re-building projects. The poverty and desperation continues.

Furthermore, there has been no justice. Accountability for the Chixoy Dam project decision makers is not included in the law Decree #378-2014. No Guatemalan government official, nor any World Bank or IDB director or project officer has ever been put on trial for their role in this criminal “development” project.

While impunity in Guatemala for war criminals and human rights violators is, unfortunately, not surprising, an equally serious problem is the impunity of institutions like the World Bank and IDB. Unlike private banks, the funds of the World Bank and IDB come from the investor countries that created and govern all Bank policies and projects, and then profit from their investments. The investor countries also provided the Banks with their immunity from legal accountability.

No Silver Linings

It is hard to overstate how deadly and destructive the Chixoy Dam project was. It is hard to overstate how inter-generationally hard the ongoing poverty, landlessness, joblessness, violence and impunity are for the survivors. It is hard to overstate how courageous their 33 year struggle for truth, justice and reparations has been. And it is hard to overstate how amazing the achievement of the \$154 million Reparations Plan is, even if no funds have been released.

As the victims' struggle for implementation of Decree 378-2014 continues, it is imperative to state clearly that the World Bank and IDB have gotten away with massacres, as well as violent, illegal evictions — all with absolute impunity.

The World Bank continues to invest massively in widely opposed, large-scale hydroelectric dam and resource extraction projects in Guatemala, throughout the Americas, and around the world. Unless it is held accountable for these crimes and other human rights violations, more blood will be spilt and more lives will be shattered.

(Grahame Russell is co-director of Rights Action, a community development and environmental and human rights solidarity organization.)

Resources:

- “Chixoy Dam: No Reparations, No Justice, No Peace”, a 15 minute film by Lazar Konforti. In the early 1980s, at the height of the Guatemalan genocide and repression, the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank invested close to \$1 billion in the Chixoy hydroelectric dam project. Thirty-two Mayan communities were forcibly and illegally displaced to make way for the dam, and hundreds of indigenous people were massacred. Thirty-three years later, survivors are still struggling for truth, justice and reparations. <http://Vimeo.Com/50015125>
- “Profiting From Genocide: The World Bank's Bloody History in Guatemala”, by Cyril Mychalejko, <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/14823-profiting-from-genocide-the-world-banks-bloody-history-in-guatemala>

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Rights Action (USA & Canada)

Rights Action believes in the interdependence of all humans and life forms on the planet, and in our fundamental dependence on the natural elements of Mother Earth. Most injustices, inequalities and environmental destructions suffered by humans and other life forms across the planet are the result of human value systems based on domination, superiority and inferiority, competition, ‘winners and losers’ and ‘we versus them’, and on separation from and domination over the natural elements of Mother Earth. Rights Action funds grassroots organizations in Guatemala and Honduras (and less-so in southern Mexico and El Salvador) working for locally-controlled development, environmental and human rights protection, and the strengthening of real democracy and rule of law. Rights Action does education and activism work concerning how the United States and Canada (governments, companies, investors and consumers) contribute to and benefit from environmental harms and human rights violations, repression, corruption and impunity in these countries.

Get Informed / Get Involved

- Speakers: Invite us to give presentations about these issues
- Educational Delegation: Join an educational delegation seminar to Guatemala and Honduras to learn more about these issues and struggles
- Daily News: www.democracynow.org / www.upsidedownworld.org / www.dominionpaper.ca/ / www.rabble.ca/
- Recommended Reading: “This Changes Everything: Capitalism versus The Climate”, by Naomi Klein; “Open Veins of Latin America”, by Eduardo Galeano; “A People’s History of the United States”, by Howard Zinn

Say No To ‘International Business and Investments, Militarism and Impunity As Usual’

The U.S. and Canadian governments, the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, and North American companies and investors (including pension funds) maintain profitable economic and military relations with the Guatemalan, Honduran and Mexican elites, turning a blind eye to death and suffering by exploitation, repression, violence and impunity that are the norm in these countries.

Because of impunity and immunity from legal liability in Canada and the U.S., it is extremely difficult to hold our companies, investors, governments and international “development” banks accountable when they contribute to and benefit from human rights violations and environmental and health harms in other countries.

Send, and keep on sending copies of this information, and your own letters, to your own elected politicians (MPs, Congresspersons, Senators), to your media, and to your own pension and investment funds, asking: Why our

governments, companies and investment firms do nothing about the poverty, repression and violence, and environmental and health harms associated with North American businesses, while benefiting from these economic, military and political relations?

Tax-Deductible Donations (Canada & United States)

To support community organizations working for locally-controlled development, the environment, human rights, real democracy and the rule of law in Honduras and Guatemala, make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

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