

“Reading of the Names: Calling Forth of Massacred Loved Ones in Rio Negro” ~ as war criminals could soon walk free in Guatemala

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/reading-of-the-names-calling-forth-of-massacred-loved-ones-in-rio-negro>

March 13, 2019, marks the 37th anniversary of one of the four large-scale Chixoy dam/Rio Negro massacres carried out in 1982 in support of the World Bank (WB) & Inter-American Development Bank’s (IDB) Chixoy hydro-electric dam investment project.

- **Below:** Photo-essay by Grahame Russell from the March 13, 2017, Rio Negro massacre commemoration ceremonies

As we have done for many years, Rights Action sent funds to the Rio Negro to help pay for their commemoration activities.

Today, we remember and honor the Maya Achi people of Rio Negro: the over 440 massacred and killed, and the survivors and their families, telling the truth and seeking justice and reparations ever since. To date, neither the WB nor the IDB have admitted any responsibility for the massacres and rapes, other killings and illegal forced evictions due to their project. Neither bank has paid any reparations to the victims.

Just as the WB and IDB walked free from any accountability, the corrupt Guatemalan congress is set to pass a ‘get-out-of-jail-free-card’ amnesty law for war criminals, including some that participated in the March 13, 1982, Rio Negro massacre of 177 Mayan Achi children and women.

- **Read:** “Why War Criminals Could Walk Free in Guatemala” by Jo-Marie Burt, March 12, 2019, https://www.americasquarterly.org/content/why-war-criminals-could-walk-free-guatemala?fbclid=IwAR0utN99YL9fO9UsvitGewpT_7WQp9d6p9l_TnbScbFOkbl1Fn7w8j_ul00

Reading of the Names: Calling Forth of Massacred Loved Ones in Rio Negro

By Grahame Russell, Rights Action

Late into the night of March 13, 2017, surviving family members of the Chixoy dam/Rio Negro massacres take turns reading off, one by one, the names of over 440 Maya Achi villagers massacred in 1982 to make way for the World Bank (WB) & Inter-American Development Bank’s (IDB) massive hydro-electric dam investment project that was built in partnership with the genocidal regimes of generals Lucas Garcia and Rios Montt, 1978-1983.



Sometime after midnight, I followed Carlos, Bruna, Cupertino and other survivors away from the ceremony at the main massacre site at the spot known as Pacoxom. Walking single file, we slipped and stumbled down into a deep mountain crevice, strewn with boulders, roots and branches. With a few cell-phone lights and candles, we scrambled to where Guatemalan soldiers and civil defense patrollers had tossed the bodies of 35 older girls and younger women from the village of Rio Negro – most of whom had been raped before being killed, and their bodies thrown deep into this crevice.



Thirty-five years ago - March 13, 1982 - a total of 177 women and children from the remote Mayan Achi village of Rio Negro were rounded up by the U.S.-backed regime and force-marched up from their soon-to-be-destroyed-and-flooded riverside village to this spot –Pacoxom- high on the mountain ridge above.



Looking down from Pacoxom to the Chixoy dam flood basin; the original Rio Negro community lies under close to 100m of water. Here, the armed men savagely killed the women and children: using ropes to strangle; smashing children on rocks; beating them to death with hard objects.

During the killing spree, soldiers and patrollers separated 35 girls and women off, raped them, then killed them and tossed their remains into the crevice.

Every March 13, family and community members hike to Pacoxom for a ceremony to name, reconnect with and honor their dead. Some join this further hike down into the crevice to where the bodies of their raped loved ones were found.



Squished together on the crevice floor, candles were lit and spread around. Accompanied by the entrancing sound of two notes played softly and repeatedly on a homemade violin and one percussion sound beating on a homemade drum, a Mayan priest swings smoking copal back and forth over the entire site and reads aloud the names of the women and girls found here, calling them to reconnect with gathered loved ones.



Later, we scrambled back up to Pacoxom, from where I looked back down into the blackness of the crevice at the deep orange glow of dozens of candles, the presence of the girls and women.

The ceremony continued through the night, including the reading of the names of more than 440 villagers slaughtered in a series of five massacres in 1981 and 1982 (including March 13) as part of calculated efforts to clear the Chixoy river basin of its inhabitants, to then dam the river, to then fill in the river basin and thus complete the WB and IDB's very profitable investment project.

At 6am, family members and loved ones gather their belongings and begin the hike down to the remains of the Rio Negro village, then to travel in small boats across the flood basin to the dam wall, then to drive out to Tactic on the Coban highway; or to begin the hike up to the top of the Baja Verapaz mountains and catch a ride from the village of Chitucan down the other side to the town of Rabinal.

It was not until 1993-1994 that the remains of the Rio Negro victims were dug up by the EAFG exhumation team (precursor to the FAFG Guatemala Foundation of Forensic Anthropology) and the survivors were able to properly bury their loved ones and thus reconnect with them. They will be back here next year, connecting the new generations to their massacred ancestors.

Chixoy dam/Rio Negro massacres

These massacres were brutally similar, in many ways, to massacres across Guatemala in 1970s, 80s and early 90s, and that reached genocidal proportions in certain Mayan regions, including Rabinal, from 1978-1983. And, in some ways the Chixoy dam massacres were worse. As the World Bank and IDB's investment project neared completion, the massacres were meant to send a message to over 30 Mayan villages along the river basin. When word spread of the savagery in and around Rio Negro, the remaining communities "agreed" to be relocated, though the project was illegal from the get go and no community ever received adequate compensation and relocation.

Today, 35 years later,

- the Guatemalan government has not paid reparations, as ordered in 2012 by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, to the survivors of more than 440 villagers killed;
- a small number of civil defense patrollers and military commissioners – themselves mostly poor Mayan men – were found guilty of and jailed for the March 13 massacre. No military officers

and none of the intellectual authors of the Chixoy dam massacres have been put on trial, let alone sentenced and jailed;

- a majority of the Rio Negro survivors continue to live today in conditions of deeply entrenched poverty in the former military concentration camp of Pacux;
- a partial amount of reparations have been paid by the Guatemalan government (not by the WB and IDB) to victims of the illegal and forced evictions of over 30 communities along the Chixoy river;
- except for the precedent setting Sepur Zarco criminal trial, no justice has been done in Guatemala for thousands of mainly Mayan women and girls who were raped as part of the regimes' strategies of genocide, massacres and terrorization.

Against great odds, extraordinary work and struggle continue in Guatemala to seek justice for the atrocities of the past and to profoundly transform their racist, exploitative and repressive government and society.

(Grahame Russell (grahame@rightsaction.org) is a non-practicing Canadian lawyer, adjunct professor at University of Northern British Columbia, & –since 1995- director of Rights Action. Feel free to re-post and publish this article.)

Need to hold U.S. and Canadian governments accountable

Keep on sending this information to your elected politicians in the U.S. and Canada holding them to account for their support for the Honduran and Guatemalan regimes, turning a blind eye to the systematic human rights violations, killings, corruption and impunity ... including now the Guatemalan regime's attempt to give impunity to war criminals.

- United States: Contact your Senators (<https://whoismyrepresentative.com/>) and Congress members (<https://www.house.gov/representatives/find-your-representative>).
- Canada: Contact your Member of Parliament and make your demands known to them (<https://www.ourcommons.ca/Parliamentarians/en/members>).

Media silence

Send this information to your media contacts, urging them to start reporting properly on U.S. and Canadian complicity with the repressive, corrupt regimes in Guatemala and Honduras.

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To support the work of our community/ human rights/ environmental defender partner groups in Honduras and Guatemala – including communities like that of Rio Negro that have worked and struggled for over 20 years for justice for the war crimes of the 1970s, 80s and 90s - make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

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