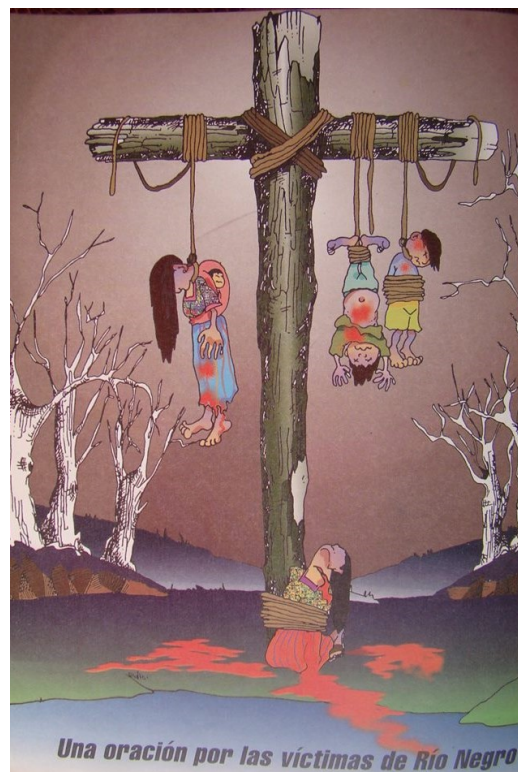


March 13, 2021 - 39th anniversary of Rio Negro massacres in Guatemala, carried out by the US-backed genocidal military regimes on behalf of the World Bank and IDB's Chixoy hydro-electric dam project

By Grahame Russell, March 13, 2021

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/march-13-2021-39th-anniversary-of-rio-negro-massacres-in-guatemala>



March 13, 2021 marks the 39th anniversary of the 1982 massacre of 177 children and women at a spot known as 'Pak-o-shom', in the mountains above Rio Negro, a Maya Achi village that had been nestled along the Chixoy river (also known as Rio Negro) for over 1000 years, until the extraordinarily violent and illegal construction the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank's Chixoy hydro-electric dam (1975-1985).

The March 13 massacre was one of five large-scale massacres carried out savagely in 1981 and 1982 by the Guatemalan military and security guards working for the Chixoy dam project.



Some 450 men and women, girls and boys, infants and elderly Río Negro were killed outright. It is hard to fathom the savagery of these slaughters: villagers were killed by machete blows, gang-rapes and beatings, being strangled, small children beaten against rocks, and shot.

Thereafter, massacre survivors perished in the surrounding mountains due to hunger and disease, after the final Río Negro/Chixoy dam massacre in the village of Agua Fria, on September 14, 1982.

The wholesale slaughter of Río Negro villagers served as the Chixoy dam project's "relocation" of the villagers to make way for the filling of the dam flood basin. In total, over 30 Mayan communities were forcibly evicted in whole or part, up and down river from the Chixoy dam wall. No community suffered more than Río Negro.

To this day, neither the World Bank or IDB have accepted any responsibility for Chixoy dam massacres and other deaths, the forced evictions and widespread loss of land, property and livelihood.

Both banks profited financially from their investments of hundreds of millions of dollars in the Chixoy dam project.

In his book "Chixoy dam, displacement and development: Perspectives from Río Negro, Guatemala", Nate Einbinder wrote: "There is no means by which to quantify what was lost in Río Negro" (<https://www.springer.com/la/book/9783319515106>).

Nate is correct. It is difficult to overstate the breadth and enormity of the World Bank and IDB's criminality and violence, in partnership with the genocidal Guatemalan regimes of Generals Lucas Garcia and Rios Montt, in just this one investment project of theirs.

The impacts of the Chixoy dam/Rio Negro massacres and forced evictions continue today in multiple ways as massacre and displacement survivors, their children and grand-children, scratch out lives of subsistence in chronic poverty; many have been forced to flee home and country and try and make a life for themselves in Mexico or the US.

It is also impossible to overstate the enormity of corruption and impunity of the World Bank, IDB and successive US-backed genocidal regimes in Guatemala that were directly responsible for the Chixoy dam/Rio Negro massacres and forced displacements.

Almost four decades have passed, and still no justice has been done against the intellectual authors, beneficiaries and profiteers of the Chixoy dam investment project. Only partial reparations have been paid for all that was killed, destroyed and lost.

Survival – Truth - Justice

A reflection on the Chixoy dam/Rio Negro massacres 39 years later, perhaps can best be understood in terms of the survival of the survivors and their on-going work and struggle to tell the truth and seek justice and full reparations.

Survival

Most Rio Negro survivors live today – with children and grandchildren born since the Chixoy dam crimes – in the former military-controlled concentration camp of Pacux, or on the dry mountainside above where the original community now lies under close to 100 meters of Chixoy dam flood basin silt buildup and water.



Sebastian Iboy Osorio, survivor of and eye-witness (as a 16-year old boy) to the March 13, 1982 massacre wherein most of his family was killed, walking in Rio Negro today, high above the mud and silt that has filled in the Chixoy river basin since it was dammed in 1983, soon after the final massacre. Much of the original community of Rio Negro lies deep below the mud level.

Their on-going life conditions of poverty, joblessness, trauma and varying degrees of hopelessness are complicated and toxic, and are a direct result of the Chixoy dam crimes.

Yet survive they do, and try to re-build, and continue to tell the truth and demand justice.

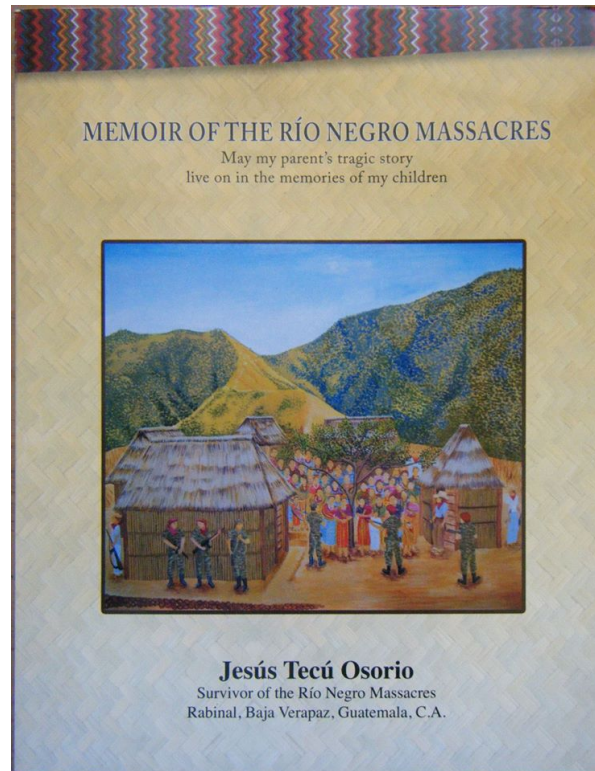
One might say it is miraculous, but it is not. It is a testament to the Rio Negro survivors' (specifically) and the Mayan peoples' (generally) courage, dignity and spiritual strength rooted deeply in their ancestors, lands and Mother Earth, gods and ceremonies.

Truth

Since the first exhumation of victims of the Chixoy dam massacres was carried out in 1993-94 by the EAFG (Guatemala Team of Forensic Anthropology) - precursor to the FAFG (Guatemalan Foundation of Forensic Anthropology), at the place known as Pakoshom, the survivors have been truth-telling for any and every one to hear.

Since this first Chixoy dam-linked mass grave exhumation, the survivors have been supporting other exhumations and pushing forward efforts to seek justice in Guatemala and internationally.

Massacre survivors and eye-witnesses - like Jesus Tecu Osorio and Carlos Chen Osorio - have written testimonial books. Documentary films have been made. Articles and reports written. Survivor-activists have travelled the world giving testimonials in conferences, and protesting at World Bank and IDB meetings.



Justice

Despite widespread documentation about the Chixoy dam crimes, no justice has been achieved against any institution (IDB, World Bank) or government (Guatemala, US) for their roles as the intellectual and material authors of the Chixoy dam crimes, death and destruction.

National courts

There is a partial exception to this last statement. Since 1994, the Rio Negro survivors have courageously pressured Guatemala's corrupted and compromised legal system to put on trial, find guilty and send to jail nine former Civil Defense Patrollers (PAC) and military commissioners, mainly from the neighboring village of Xococ, that participated in the Rio Negro slaughters under the orders and control of the Guatemalan military.

On one level, this is an important achievement. In Guatemala's corrupted legal system, war crimes trials are few, and convictions fewer.

However, on most levels, the sentencing and jailing of nine of the lowest ranking "material actors" of the Chixoy dam crimes almost serves as proof of the impunity with which the "intellectual authors" of the crimes acted.

Not one single military officer in the chain of command, who ordered and carried out the Chixoy dam massacres, was captured, tried and sentenced. Not one official or program officer from the World Bank and IDB was subjected to any investigation into the role of the banks in partnering with the US-backed genocidal regimes of Guatemala (1975-85) in planning and carrying out all aspects of the project – including the illegal land dispossession, the massacres and forced displacements, etc.

Inter-American Court of Human Rights

Because only low-ranking “material actors” were found guilty of the Chixoy dam crimes, the Rio Negro survivors filed a petition with the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, arguing impunity and lack of access to justice.

After years of delays, manipulations by the Guatemalan government, and threats to Rio Negro survivors leading this justice struggle, on October 20, 2012, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights found the Guatemalan government responsible for the Rio Negro/ Chixoy dam massacres and ordered the government to: legally investigate the massacres; prosecute the perpetrators; search for the disappeared; carry out exhumations and identify the victims; publicly acknowledge its responsibility; build basic infrastructure and services for Rio Negro survivors in Pacux; implement projects to rescue the culture of the Maya Achi people; provide medical and psychological treatment to the victims; and pay compensation to surviving families for material and non-material damages suffered.

While this ruling of the Inter-American Court is also an important achievement of partial justice, it is noteworthy that the Court did not individualize responsibility - the ruling had no impact on the intellectual authors of the Chixoy dam crimes. Moreover, the Inter-American Court refused to investigate the roles and responsibilities of the IDB and World Bank, reinforcing their impunity.

Finally, it was not until 2019, that the government of Guatemala made the first partial payments to some of the surviving Rio Negro family members, while not complying with any other terms of the Court’s sentence.

Chixoy Dam Reparations Campaign

While not a formal legal process, this Chixoy Dam Reparations Campaign was and is an extraordinary achievement. After years of exhumations and other truth-telling struggles, in 2004, Rio Negro survivors united with the other villages forcibly displaced and harmed by the Chixoy dam crimes to demand comprehensive reparations.

A clarification: the Inter-American Court sentence deals with the Rio Negro massacres directly linked to the Chixoy dam project; the Reparations Campaign deals with other losses and destructions caused by the project.

As with the Inter-American Court case, it was only after years of delays, manipulations and threats to the survivors leading this struggle, that on November 8, 2014, then president and former army general Otto Perez Molina (now in jail on corruption charges) apologized on behalf of the government for the human rights violations and sufferings caused by the Chixoy dam project, and signed into law Decree #378-2014, “the Public Policy of Reparations for Communities Affected by the Construction of the Chixoy hydro-electric dam project”.

As of 2021, the government of Guatemala has made only partial payments of the total amount to be paid in family compensation and re-building projects for the communities harmed and destroyed in varying degrees by the project.

Again, the World Bank and IDB resisted all pressures to be included in the Reparations Campaign investigation into roles and responsibilities. Impunity and corruption of the “international community” was again reinforced.

The Enormity of Courage, Dignity and Strength

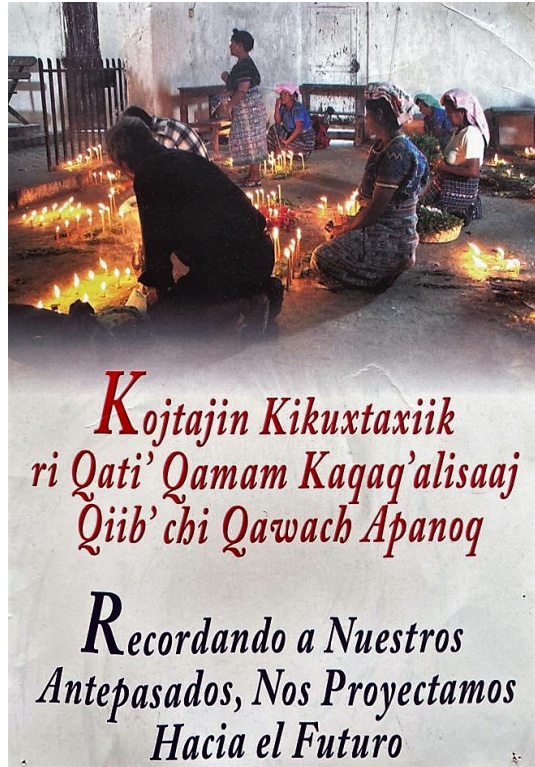
39 years later, a small measure of reparations has been paid to some of the impoverished Chixoy dam victims. No justice has been done for the roles and responsibilities of the “intellectual authors” in the Guatemalan government, World Bank and IDB that promoted, designed, implemented and profited financially from the project.

Pointing out the impunity and corruption of the intellectual authors and profiteers of the Chixoy dam project crimes highlights the enormity of this global human problem. Across the planet today, governments, “development” banks, corporations and other investors push ahead with “resource development” projects, violently displacing populations and destroying habitats, violating a wide range of individual and collective rights, and ravaging Mother Earth.

The Chixoy dam was one such project, perhaps more deadly, violent and destructive than most.

Pointing out the enormity of the impunity and corruption of the authors and profiteers of the Chixoy dam crimes takes nothing away, and indeed highlights the courage and dignity, strength and vision of the Rio Negro survivors.

Since I first met Carlos, Jesus, Antonia, Bruna, Teodora, Cristobal and other Rio Negro survivors in 1994, I have been in awe of their spiritual strength and dignity, of their commitment to re-building lives, families and community, and of their courageous, relentless struggle for truth and justice.



Since 1994, Rights Action has supported, as best we can, many truth and justice, community development and re-building projects initiated by the Rio Negro survivors. We are committed to continue doing so, and to continue to demanding that the World Bank and IDB be held fully accountable for their role in the Chixoy dam crimes.

Webinar - March 11, 2021: Commemoration of the Guatemalan Río Negro Massacres

Please join the families and community, survivors of the Rio Negro massacres, and the descendents of those killed on March 13, 1982, for a virtual gathering to listen to the history, testimonials and to share stories.

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83531044767>

More information

- Carlos Chen, ADIVIMA (Association for Integral Development of Victims of Violence in the Verapaces, Maya Achi): chenosorio.carlos@gmail.com;
- Jesus Tecu Osorio, Rabinal Legal Clinic (Bufete Popular): bufete_rabinal@hotmail.com

Archives - Chixoy Dam/Rio Negro Massacres

<https://rightsaction.org/chixoydam-archives>

Beginning in 1994, and continuing today in a number of ways, Rights Action has funded and been involved in work - led by Mayan Achi survivors of massacres and genocide - to hold the Guatemalan government, World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank accountable for the massacres and killings and violent evictions, dispossession, poverty and despair caused by the 1975-1985 Chixoy dam hydro-electric dam project.

Chixoy Dam: No Reparations, No Justice, No Peace (2013)

This 15 minute film by Lazar Konforti (<http://vimeo.com/50015125>) summarizes how, at the height of the US-backed genocides in Guatemala, 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 displaced; hundreds of Rio Negro villagers were massacred.

Other solidarity/NGO groups with long-term relations with Rio Negro

- NISGUA (Network in Solidarity with People of Guatemala): www.nisgua.org
- GHRC (Guatemalan Human Rights Commission): www.ghrc-usa.org
- Breaking the Silence: www.breakingthesilenceblog.com
- Qachuu Aloom 'Mother Earth' Association: <http://gardensedge.org/about/qachuu-aloom/>

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