

## Seeking Truth and Justice in Guatemala

*“If the bones of the dead speak, why should we, who are alive, remain silent?”*

Humberto Ak’abal, Maya K’iché poet

More than thirty years have passed. But for a group of Q’eqch’í women living near Sepur Zarco, and thousands of Maya Ixil residents in and around Nebaj, memories of the atrocities they experienced during Guatemala’s armed conflict have never died. Nor has their quest for justice.

Earlier this year, together with our counterpart Project Counselling Service (PCS), Inter Pares staff members

visited both regions and spoke to survivors of the genocide carried out against Guatemala’s Indigenous peoples by the country’s military. Working with local organizations for over two decades, PCS and Inter Pares have assisted Guatemalans as they attempt to rebuild the social fabric of their communities.

Central to these efforts

has been providing psychological and social support to survivors – in particular Indigenous women – and creating safe spaces where they can tell their stories and be heard. Another aspect is to give visibility to the issue and to support efforts by Guatemalans to bring the perpetrators to justice.

This work bore fruit in May 2013 when, in a historic trial, former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt was found guilty of having committed genocide and crimes against humanity against the Maya Ixil people. The trial established an international precedent, as it was the first time a former head of state had to face such charges in his or her own country. The outcome was in large part due to the steadfast courage of Maya Ixil survivors, and the persistence of human rights groups that accompanied them throughout this process.

During our visit to Nebaj, we heard from survivors who recalled the “scorched earth” policies of the Ríos Montt dictatorship. Entire villages were razed and homes burned; crops were destroyed, livestock slaughtered, and thousands of women, men and children forced to flee into the mountains to save their lives. One man, whose wife, father, and mother were killed by the soldiers, recounted how he lived for six years in the mountains; another



Maya Ixil women testifying at the genocide trial in Guatemala City.



RODOLFO Y. DIAZ

woman spent eight years there after her family was murdered. The survivors had to endure almost insurmountable difficulties, subsisting off roots and leaves, exposed to harsh weather conditions and always fearing army attacks.

In delivering the verdict, Judge Jazmín Barrios stated that 5.5% of the Maya Ixil population had been annihilated during the seventeen months General Ríos Montt had been Guatemala’s de facto head of State. She emphasized that rape and sexual violence against women, girls, and the elderly had been used in an effort to dehumanize the Ixil population and exterminate its people.

The human rights violations exposed during the Ríos Montt trial, in particular sexual violence against women and girls, did not take place only in the Ixil region. Rather, this was a systematic practice conducted by State agents as

## More to Migration than *lo bonito*

In the town of Zacualpa, families used to be torn apart by the internal armed conflict. Today it is migration that separates families. Generation after generation, Indigenous K'iché families eke out a living, often toiling on land that was taken from them during the conflict and remains in the hands of wealthier families. This economic hardship drive scores of people to leave their relatives and children and to seek work in the North.

Inter Pares' collaboration with our counterpart Project Counselling Service (PCS) has evolved with the changing realities in Guatemala. Historically, PCS's program on forced uprooting dealt with displacement due to conflict. Today it focuses on the causes and effects of migration. This is why we now collaborate with the Office of the Migrant, an initiative of Zacualpa's Catholic church. Two bright young local staff, José Daniel Gonzáles and Luisa Martínez Hernández, attend to the community.



Sr. Ana María Alvarez, the director, and José Daniel and Luisa, staff, keep maps in the office to help family members understand where their relatives have migrated to, or where they are detained.

The Office of the Migrant has played a significant role since it opened in 2010. By organizing public fairs and rallies about migration, it has placed a critical spotlight on the topic. Youth perform short plays showing the perils of the dangerous journey north and the discrimination migrant workers commonly face. This lifts some of the secrecy around the issue, as well as the shame felt by families left behind and migrants who have returned to Zacualpa. Previously, people were told mostly of *lo bonito*, that is, the good sides of migration: high wages, remittances, the American dream. But the Office's activities challenge a persistent myth about migration – that the benefits far outweigh the risks. All this contributes to open, honest, and informed conversations, and a fuller understanding of migration.

The less-public work of the Office supports families that are trying to track down missing or detained relatives. It compiles locations and contacts for detention centres across the United States, and collaborates with migrant solidarity networks to make contact with those being held. There are also times that Daniel and Luisa must support families through the difficult and heartbreaking task of repatriating loved ones who died en route to their destination.

Inter Pares, PCS, and the Office of the Migrant are part of a network of organizations working for the reform of migration policies in Guatemala and destination countries, including Canada, as well as challenging the structural causes of migration. People have the right to move but there should also be alternatives. And when individuals make the decision to migrate, it should be with full awareness of the risks, pros and cons. ✂

### Solidarity is

bearing witness and accompanying  
building relationships

sharing experiences

learning from one another

working for change in one's own context

### Introducing... Inter Pares Solidarity Tours

In February 2014, a small group of Inter Pares supporters will travel to Guatemala for a ten-day Solidarity Tour. Participants will be accompanied by staff members Bill Fairbairn and Kathryn Dingle as they:

# Not Your Usual Fighter



GUILLAUME CHARBONNEAU

Lolita Chávez

**L**olita Chávez Ixcaquic is a fighter – but not what you might picture. About five feet tall and soft-spoken, she speaks so passionately about her people’s struggle for their right to self-determination that nobody can doubt her strength. Lolita is Maya K’iché, and one of the

co-founders of the K’iché People’s Council as well as its elected spokesperson. Last March, she travelled to Canada to take part in a cross-country “Defend Dissent Tour,” organized by Inter Pares’ counterparts *Projet Accompagnement Québec-Guatemala* (PAQG) and the Maritime-based Breaking the Silence Network (BTS), among others.

In Guatemala, Lolita’s organization helped coordinate “community consultations of good faith,” a process where the K’iché People’s Council gave voice to 92 communities affected by the increasing number of large-scale resource development projects undertaken in the Guatemalan highlands. Even though a massive “*no a la minería*” (no to mining) was voiced at each of the peaceful, grassroots consultations, activists like Lolita still have to fight for these perspectives to be heard. The democratic decisions taken by the communities are completely ignored by

private corporations that are active in and around the communities, as well as by the Guatemalan authorities.

The right to consultation and to free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous peoples is recognized in international conventions to which Guatemala is a signatory. But national court rulings related to conflicts around natural resource exploitation have stated that community consultations are not legally binding. Nonetheless, the consultations have a strong symbolic power, which explains why people like Lolita are constantly targeted for their activism.

In this tense context, community leaders and organizers in Guatemala often face threats or attacks. Inter Pares counterparts PAQG and BTS know this reality very well, having sent many international human rights observers to accompany Guatemalan human rights defenders over the past twenty years. These companions have been physically present in many community consultations, documenting and raising awareness about them. An important part of both organizations’ accompaniment work is also to encourage Canadian solidarity with these struggles, and a tour highlighting the efforts of community activists defending their land was a perfect opportunity for collaboration. What better choice for a guest speaker than Lolita Chávez?

With the help of many allied organizations such as Inter Pares counterpart MiningWatch Canada, the “Defend Dissent Tour” became a month-long North American journey, and was a great success. Thanks to Lolita’s courage, her struggle is now shared by many more concerned Canadians. And as Guatemala makes history by finally putting people accused of genocide on trial, the importance of our solidarity cannot be underestimated. ☞

- Travel to remote communities and experience Guatemala’s rich and diverse cultures
- Meet with courageous human rights activists and community leaders working to defend Indigenous peoples’ rights
- See the work of organizations that are providing support to people pushed to migrate, and accompanying survivors of human rights abuses
- Build solidarity with national-level organizations that are linking these struggles to broader projects for social change

We hope this inaugural tour will be the first of many to visit our programs. If you are interested in future trips, contact Kathryn: [kdingle@interpares.ca](mailto:kdingle@interpares.ca) or 1-866-563-4801 ext. 137.



Mural Project created by 75 Q'eqchí survivors of the 1978 massacre in Panzos, a town in eastern Guatemala near Sepur Zarco.



These Q'eqchí women are among those testifying in the trial for sexual slavery. Their faces are covered in this photo to protect their identity.

part of a country-wide counterinsurgency. Eighty-nine percent of the victims were Indigenous women.

In 2003, with support from Inter Pares and PCS, some women activists and organizations began to challenge the profound social silence around the use of sexual violence during the conflict. They worked to place the issue within the public sphere, and support women survivors in their search for justice and healing. Among these was a group of Q'eqchí women who had been used as sexual slaves by soldiers at the Sepur Zarco military camp during the 1980s.

In the beginning, according to a former PCS staff member, the women could not express in words what had happened to them. But that has changed. In September 2012, with the support of organizations accompanied by PCS and Inter Pares, fifteen Q'eqchí women testified before the High-Risk Court in Guatemala City in the first criminal trial for sexual slavery and rape committed during the country's armed conflict.

Inter Pares met with ten of the women in March 2013. One recounted how the army, after killing their husbands, put together a list of the young widows and ordered them to come to the military camp. For the next six years, they were forced to cook for the soldiers, wash their clothes, and were repeatedly raped. Another woman added, "If we refused them, it was a death sentence." In the midst of such sadness, the women also spoke of how, after so many years of holding these memories inside, they eventually found the courage and strength to speak out. The caring and love they share for one another was evident as they spoke of the importance of having come together.

The forces of impunity remain strong in Guatemala. The sexual slavery case is still in its early stages. As for the

Ríos Montt verdict, there are ongoing legal challenges and the real possibility of a re-trial. Yet, whatever the future may hold, and regardless of whether real justice is attainable in today's Guatemala – whose current President is a former army general who headed the Nebaj military base during the Ríos Montt dictatorship – the courage and witness of the survivors cannot be undone. The proceedings against Efraín Ríos Montt and the attempts to hold to account those responsible for the sexual slavery of the women in Sepur Zarco are encouraging developments, highlighting the importance of ongoing, sustained accompaniment of Guatemalans in their struggle for truth and justice. ❧

*"...May their memory remain alight  
And may the flame of remembrance  
Never be extinguished...  
No more blood,  
No more pain,  
Never again..."*

Humberto Ak'abal, Maya K'iché poet

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With the support of thousands of Canadians, Inter Pares works in Canada and around the world with social change organizations who share the analysis that poverty and injustice are caused by inequities within and among nations, and who are working to promote peace, and social and economic justice in their communities and societies.

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