

Land and Justice Today in Guatemala

by Jody Sloum

When we first visited Guatemala in 1992 and started our working friendship with the Weaver's Committee of Santiago Atitlan, the members spoke of the importance of Farmer to Farmer as an international connection and a voice they could count on if violence and injustices were inflicted on their community again.

Over the years we've written letters to congressional representatives, to the local leaders in their Guatemalan communities and to the ambassador of Guatemala. The security that our involvement, this international voice, gave to the Tzu'tujul Maya families was surprisingly important and effective. With the terrible civil war and the direct U.S. involvement, we felt it was a small thing we can do for these innocent, powerless people.

I have heard about the forced evictions of villages in Guatemala located in areas that mining companies and other businesses plan to take over, but I hadn't given it much thought. With our Farmer to Farmer work in Guatemala we find plenty of issues facing the Maya people we work with directly, so it's easy to block out these reports of human rights problems in other parts of the country.



Kelsey and Maria

But recently I heard first-hand accounts when I attended a presentation at Macalester College, at a presentation by Maria Cuc Choc, sponsored by the Guatemala Human Rights Commission's (GHRC). Maria is a Q'eqchi' Maya human rights leader, and works with indigenous farming communities to organize against the encroaching threat of illegal land-grabs and forced evictions by large landowners and international mining companies.

She began by saying, "My work is to educate women to organize, resist and denounce the human rights abuses being inflicted on our communities." Maria's family is involved in this human rights work and they've been targeted for this work. In 2009, her brother-in-law was killed by security guards belonging to the nickel mining company CGN-Hudbay. Her brother Ramiro Choc is one of Guatemala's most high-profile political prisoners.

Maria presented alongside the director of GHRC, Kelsey-Alford Jones. Their talk focused on communities in the Polochic Valley and in El Estor, Izabal northeastern Guatemala that are being displaced by biofuel and nickel-mining companies. Last March fourteen communities were violently evicted to make way for export agribusiness production of biofuels. Maria showed photos of the military police and security guards of the companies working together to evict the villagers, burn their homes, and destroy their cornfields, forcibly pushing the families off their land. These families have nowhere to go and their historical and ancestral rights to the land are ignored.

Maria's personal stories, with explicit photos, left me filled with a mixture of horror, sadness and

outrage. How could this be happening after the Peace Accords were signed in 1996? Wasn't this type of injustice ended then?

Kelsey also spoke of the newly elected president, Otto Pérez Molina, a former military leader accused of taking part in massacres during the civil war. He fears that the violence and human rights abuses targeted on the Maya population will increase. We are entering a very uncertain time in Guatemala that calls for our involvement once again. I left feeling that we must speak for those people whose voices are being ignored.

From the GHRC website here is what we can do:

1. Tell the Guatemalan government to protect the communities in the Polochic Valley. At this webpage you'll find more information: salsa.democracyinaction.org/o/2690/p/dialog/action/public/?action_KEY=8522

2. Contact your U.S. representatives and ask them to:

- Urge the Guatemalan government to fully implement the Peace Accords, including special attention to issues of indigenous land rights.
- Provide ongoing support to strengthen the Attorney General's Office, particularly the unit devoted to human rights cases, justice sector reform, and the Interior Ministry, as well as ongoing support for the UN-backed International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG).
- Continue the ban on military funds for Guatemala maintained by the U.S. Congress.
- Support national policies that focus on prevention which include civil society participation, with a focus on regions with the highest levels of conflict, and the dismantling of criminal, armed and clandestine structures operating outside the rule of law.
- Urge police reform initiatives that include a professionalization of the police force, effective internal investigations,