

Wendy in Guatemala, Never Never Land



Report

Wendy is Q'eqchí, two and a half years old and weighs 13 pounds. She has already lost one eye and, if she survives, is likely to grow up completely blind and suffer from mental retardation. Wendy is suffering from one of the worst forms of severe malnutrition syndrome. Hunger for Wendy, like so many other girls in Guatemala, is not intellectual. It has a face, causes, solutions, contexts, responsibilities and even history.

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Plaza Publica has followed this issue since its inception. Wendy's family is one of the 800 families evicted between March and May this year from the lands on which they lived and planted corn in the Valley Polochic Valley in Panzós, Alta Verapaz. The operation carried out by the National Civil Police, the army and Utzaj Chabil's private security did not stop with the physical expulsion of several thousand people from the lands they occupied. They also burned the corn plants which the families had indebted themselves to plant and which could prevent more cases like Wendy's.

Since the time of the eviction of which Wendy was a victim, three villagers have been killed and several more wounded by gunfire. There have been dozens of violent acts by paramilitary groups and the Guatemalan state has not fulfilled the "precautionary measures" related to food, health and safety ordered on June 20th by the Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). The deadline for compliance was July 5th. These measures are to ensure the physical safety, health, food and housing of these 800 evicted Q'eqchi families.

An assembly of representatives of the 800 evicted families organized by the Peasant Unity Committee (CUC) and a dialogue session between the families' representatives and COPREDEH (Presidential Commission for Human Rights in Guatemala) as well as a sleepless night with members the community which is "semi-occupying" the Finca Paraná, allows us to develop an account of events and responsibilities with regard to cases like that which stars in this story, a mirror of the worst consequences of child malnutrition plaguing Guatemala.

"Tenaciously ordinary" and "indistinguishable" from hundreds of indigenous protests and hundreds of reactions from the elite and the colonial government during the Republic. These are the terms that Greg Grandin, Pulitzer Prize finalist and one of the best historians who has investigated the history of this area, used to refer to the conflict over land in the Valley of Polochic. In 1871, the liberal revolution registered and expropriated, for the first time, the lands on which the Q'eqchi had lived for centuries. From then until today, the indigenous have continued to die fighting to reclaim their right to cultivate the lands that ancestrally belong to them. The current situation is just a repeat of a land conflict rooted in centuries. Wendy's hunger is just one consequence of a system of land distribution that has by all accounts failed.

On Thursday, September 1st, on a hillside in the “mountain range of the clouds”, in an outdoor space, an assembly of 25 peasants, Q’eqchí men and women fanned themselves and sought shade to escape the heat and humidity, trying to scare off the mantle of mosquitoes that attacked them. They are the representatives of the 800 displaced families. They are preparing their strategy in an estate occupied for years, under a sign which memorializes Mama Maquín, a peasant killed by the army while claiming her right to the land in 1978 during a slaughter a few miles away---the slaughter of Panzós.

Much of the assembly is dedicated to calculating the cost of the long and expensive transportation that will allow them to attend the meeting, unaffordable on their budgets, as well as the discussion of the possibility of delivering to the State a detailed list of names and locations of families evicted from lands managed by the sugar refinery, Chabil Utzaj, so their needs can be assessed. Fear grips the peasants. "Why didn't they make this list before the eviction? Why didn't they ask us and plan the food, shelter and healthcare before and instead evicted us like animals, leaving us no place to go? How can we trust them now?" are the repeated questions.

For several hours, the peasants recount the series of intimidations of which they've been victims for months. They insist that first the paramilitary groups that spread terror across Polochic Valley, allegedly organized by the company and condoned by inaction--if not open collaboration from the police--must be dismantled. The result of the coercion is evident. There are fewer and fewer people who dare to remain involved in the struggle for land. The witness list is long.

A.E.H¹, the person who organized the meeting and translates from Q’eqchí to Spanish, has been hunted down in his house in Panzós. "The Widmanns (owners of the sugar refinery), took pictures of all the leaders, then their private security came to my house on three occasions. I hid, so they talked to my wife and daughters. They have also disguised themselves, offering work, and always end up saying that the best way to ensure my safety would be to leave the group and work for them. Otherwise, something could happen to me."

He is not the only peasant who claims to have been threatened. On August 24th the National Police pulled J.B. out of a bus on the way back to his community from El

¹ All names of the members of the community have been abbreviated for their protection.

Estor. After pulling him off the bus in front of the passengers, they went through all his belongings, surrounded him and intimidated him without cause. Twelve police officers warned him: "If you keep creating problems on the farms we are going to f**k you." A. V.C. from Miralvalle has been castigated on several occasions, always in the same way. "They come by me on a motorcycle and tell me that if they had a pistol they would shoot me right then because I won't stop f**king with the bosses." M.C. of Riofrio, has been shouted at and threatened with weapons from the back of the house of a relative where he has lived since being evicted.

From the meeting with COPREDEH to a night on an occupied farm.

The day after the peasant assembly, Friday, September 2nd, the second dialogue session between the Presidential Commission for Human Rights and the peasants was held in Finca La Tinta to assess the level of compliance with the IACHR's precautionary measures. Discussions jeopardized by the peasant's fear of being filmed and photographed laid the foundations for a dialogue of the deaf. The translation, regrettably riddled with omissions and the repeated assessments of the Q'eqchí interpretation provided by the government, served only to further dampen spirits.

To physically understand the fear that grips these peasants and contextualize their relationship with the state structure, it is necessary to follow the hours of road leading from La Tinta, where the meeting took place to Finca Paraná, in the municipality of Panzós--and follow it at night. There, the scene reminds one of those dizzying montage horror movies so fashionable recently. In the dark, lightning from a thunderstorm allows you to distinguish, in flashes of just a second, the shadows of several men, moving in a darkness that we practically have to feel our way through, on a path leading to a structure only five feet long by three feet wide, made of two metal plates and several supporting poles.

92 families live in Finca Paraná. After the eviction last March, 22 stayed here, between the remains of the thousand acres of corn they had planted, now burned, and the highway. A small fire allows us to make out what they want us to see --- a series of holes created by bullets. On August 10th, about 30 men in three pickups attacked at night, wounding three people with gunfire, including a woman and child. Since then, the women and children sleep in another place and the men stand guard.

They insist the attacks will recur. Just two hours after arriving, any doubt concerning this claim is dispelled. Two bursts of six shots each added to the symphony of sound that fills any night in the field. Several of the farmers run, scared, while others distribute themselves strategically preparing to repel a hypothetical direct attack. If that occurs, there will be casualties. No doubt. Weapons on both sides of the barrier. Here and there. For over an hour, the people who fired the shots walk straight, parallel to where we are, carrying lanterns to show their exact location.

Federico C. puts this all in context: "I have already fought before. But not with my people. In 1987, when he was 14 years old, the Guatemalan army kidnapped me in Telemán. I had to fight with them for six years. I am prepared to defend my land. If we walk toward the river, I can show you the place where many peasants are buried. The army killed them. This land is irrigated with our blood and the occupation of this property is the closest I've been in my life to having my own land. If I cannot leave my children land of their own, they will starve."

If home is where someone cooks, sleeps and projects a better future than the present to their children, these 22 farmers have spent almost a year defending their homes and are willing and ready to continue. The dream and the silence stop imposing themselves. Sleep and silence have just imposed themselves. The facts are undeniable. Fatigue and silence prevail. Someone is interested in instilling fear in these people. Still, the peasants describe this as a peaceful night. But that's not all.

"Yesterday (September 1st) the refinery workers arrived with a tractor, accompanied by their private security and the national police and began planting sugar cane." While the women prepare black corn tortillas, Marcelino C. shows us the planted furrows which reach, literally, to the structure these people inhabit, furrows full, still, of corn cobs and burned plants. "The National Police are always with them, protecting them and not us. They come every day and while they work, they threaten us."

And so, walking around the farm to meet the families, we come upon fear and hunger. Venancio B., 50 years old with two children, shows me his cabin. For Venancio, what hurts the most is the image the house conveys on the outside. "When someone walks down the road or visits us, it looks like we are lazy because we are not working the land. But I've been working since I can remember, and I just want to work the land for my children and not for someone else for a pittance of wages."

Around the walls is their wealth. "The pumpkin, cucumber and watermelon are almost all that have come up, and they have almost run out." Inside the house is their extreme poverty. A cardboard bed, a cradle and a walker handmade out of wood, and a hand corn grinder are all of their belongings. "Yesterday morning we did not eat, but I was promised a day of work. I will be paid 30 quetzales, so I ordered a bag of flour on credit, which costs 12 quetzales and with that my wife can cook tortillas for two days."

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes, but we are not the worst off. Ask Federico".

Frederico, who despite sharing several hours of nocturnal dialogue about his experiences in the army during the civil war, out of shame had not spoken to us about the situation of his family, leads us to where Wendy is starving to death and finishes by drawing a map of the absolute lack of enforcement by the state of the preventative measures ordered by the IACHR for the protection of families displaced by the violence.

Contextualized by the situation on the ground, we return to the meeting with COPREDEH. On one side, peasants tired of deadlines, meetings and failure to follow agreements; on the other side, representatives of the State imbued with a respect for extremely long and detailed institutional procedures, which as many times as they are repeated, explained and understood, do not contain any real information on the urgent response. Almost nothing that is said is carried out. The nonsense between official discourse and reality on the ground is enormous, resulting in the firm belief that the state's strategy is to procrastinate. After all, with only days before the election it is easier for them to gain time and pass the resolution of this conflict to the government that emerges from the elections next September 11th.

According to Vinicio Vargas, a delegate of the National Secretariat for Food Security in Alta Verapaz, "We tried to identify potential beneficiaries, but we could not find them because they are scattered in inaccessible places and over long distances." Journalists met Wendy in a cabin on the road, 100 meters from the Finca Paraná, a symbolic center of the land conflict, just two hours after dawn on Saturday, September 3rd.

Byron Oliva, legal adviser to the Ministry of Health, keeps giving thanks for the presence of human rights organizations accompanying the peasants--the same organizations who denounce his inaction--but he continues to explain that his department "has a system of

preventive health that works according to certain protocols that cannot begin without the creation of lists." Rosario B. an elderly woman who lives in Quinich, with a depressed and defeated look that reflects 500 years of suffering, wants to answer.

She pulls up her shirt, showing her left arm, which is almost immobilized. A bruise, which runs the chromatic scale from yellow to black hits, as evidence, the eyes of those present. "On Sunday August 28th I was returning with my grandson from the Telemán market. Four men dressed in black and masked, on two motorbikes, surrounded us and beat me with a stick. My grandson began to throw stones, and they left. They wanted to scare us because they know that people listen to me. What behavior is this? They were not born here. We were. They were brought out of the air, we belong to the earth." Rosario tells the advisor of preventive curative health of the Republic that in the Health Center in Telemán she received insults and they refused to treat her, charging her with usurpation. Always the same dialogue of the deaf. "Denounce." says the State. "To whom, when the police are on the side of the sugar refinery and their private security, and even invite them to meals?" insist these peasants who long ago lost faith in police.

COPREDEH handed over a copy of a report by the Directorate General of Private Security Services about the security companies working for sugar refinery Chabil Utzaj. His delirious reading only serves to support the conclusion that makes its way to the witnesses of the meeting. It is a mere recounting of some of the violent acts already reported by peasants and announces that in the valley there are no less than 16 private security companies operating. A member from one company identified, Shield Security, has had proceedings brought against them in the prosecutor's office. The recommendation is that that the Directorate General of Private Security Services coordinates with the prosecutor's office. Period.

José Alberto Artola, representative of the State Government in Alta Verapaz, contributes its measures. "We will establish a nocturnal surveillance system and open a process of evaluating agents of the National Civil Police in the area to replace those who are not optimal." Always located in the desirable future which speaks so little to those who are daily victims of violence, the words pronounced by the representatives of state security are contradicted by the facts found in the field by reporters. 24 hours later, Matthew C. another peasant, would call me to say, "They're here again, members of the security of the sugar refinery, accompanied by the National Police."

The moment comes for the peasant's proposal. Clear and virtually non-negotiable. The 800 families which are the subjects of the precautionary measures that should have been completed over two months ago and remain trapped in the paralyzing dreams of Morpheus, agreed to develop the lists. They regrouped at three farms and there, under cover, in a food and health security situation, are counted and listed to receive state aid. The places designated are, Finca Santa Rosita, Finca Paraná, and Finca August 8th.

But the train wreck is total. "The government did not condone or endorse occupations. If you re-occupy a property, the precautionary measures will be lifted immediately," Hugo Martinez replies, head of the Presidential Human Rights Defense Unit. "Access to land is not part of any negotiation," Mildred Lopez, the manager of the National System of Permanent Dialogue, emphatically adds.

The deadline for responding to the measures imposed on the Guatemalan state passed two months ago, and this meeting ended with the agreement to meet face to face again on September 29th to assess the application of the precautionary measures. Always on the table though is the question of the lists of the people displaced, without which the representatives of the State insist they cannot intervene. The peasants are wary of questionnaires put forth by the State, aware that some information they ask for could serve to illuminate their leadership structure and be used as documentary proof of the occupation of the land, which might allow for more legal complaints against them on top of the 125 that already exist.

"What precautionary measures will they suspend if none have been applied?" asks Sergio Beltetón, a lawyer representing the peasants in the name of the Peasant Unity Committee, adding, "we have a train wreck that pits the right to private property against the right to life and food. While the peasants are persuaded to agree not to occupy any more fincas, COPREDEH is granted a new deadline of September 29th to apply the precautionary measures. As time passes, this seems straight out of the pages of *Waiting for Godot*."

At the beginning of last century, James Barrie imagined "Neverland" as a place where characters like Peter Pan and Wendy could refuse to grow up and continue to play. Guatemala, for the Wendy of Finca Paraná, has today become, persistently, a creepy postmodern version of "Neverland" in which a particular model of palm oil and

sugar cane monoculture are made possible by ownership schemes and concentration of land that have not changed much since the nineteenth century and are protected through the use of force and the inaction of the authorities, condemning many children to never grow up and even die in the worst of ways. From the "green famine" that makes its way through the vegetation of one of the most fertile regions of the planet which still, according to UNICEF, presents a chronic child malnutrition rate of 49%, rising to 70% when it comes to the indigenous such as Wendy. Her hunger knows no deadlines, much less missed deadlines.