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GUATEMALA SITUATION

JULY 1980

- July 12 - In San Juan Cotzal, Quiche, the place where Bill Woods was killed, four masked men from the military quarters - which is the commandeered market place and building, went through the town checking all of the men for military identification cards. They told the men who had the I.D. cards that they had to present themselves at the military quarters. After they had gathered there the soldiers killed three of the men supposedly to put fear into the others. At noon, as 200 men were laying face down on the ground being harassed by their military captors, six guerrillas appeared to save them.
- July 13 - Bishop Gerardi and the priests of the Diocese of Quiche, in protest against the threats against the lives of the priests and laity, as well as the assassination of the two priests, decided to have only one Mass on Sunday in the Diocese, which was to be held at the parish where Padre Faustino Villanueva was assassinated. When the Superior of the Sacred Heart Fathers - the community that Faustino belonged to - approached the town of Joyabaj, the people stopped him and informed him that the motorcycle which appeared in town the night Padre Faustino was killed, showed up again that day - (this motorcycle is ordinarily kept at the military base in Santa Cruz).

The people said the Bishop should not come because there was a plan to assassinate him also. Consequently none of the priests nor the Bishop arrived. One hour and a half later, a policeman arrived at the Bishop's house and inquired as to what was delaying him and when would he arrive?

July 28 - Probably in partial retaliation for what happened on the 12th, 500 guerrillas at five o'clock in the morning surrounded the military quarters in San Juan Cotzal. They gave the soldiers, about 100 of them, the opportunity to go free if they left their arms. Some of the soldiers, however, decided to fight it out and sixteen were killed and eight wounded. None of the guerrillas were killed - they used the tombs in the cemetery for cover. After the shooting, the guerrillas rang the church bells and called the people to a meeting to explain to them what was happening in Guatemala. At 7:00 A.M., the guerrillas rapidly left the town. At about 8:00 A.M. helicopters and planes of the Air Force bombed the outskirts of this town, and seemed to be the whole army of the area descended on San Juan Cotzal looking for the Ejecito Guerrillero de los Pobres guerrillas. The soldiers broke into the houses and took all men between the ages of 12 to 60 to the military quarters. As the soldiers corralled the men, many of them were crying as they perceived the fate that the soldiers planned for them. The soldiers picked out 60 men of each group from 12 to 60, tied their hands behind their backs and killed them one by one before the eyes of the others. The survivors were forced to dig common graves. Before leaving, the military commandant who is the head of the Departments of Huehuetenango and Quiche, hollered to the people: "The next time the guerrillas kill another soldier here, we will kill all the men because you people bring us problems." (The army released the following story of the incident: "In confrontation with the guerrillas in San Juan Cotzal, the army killed 39 of them while only 3 soldiers were killed.")

July 23 - Three army trucks, full of troops, various jeeps and a helicopter occupied the village of La Estancia, situated 15 kilometers from the capital of the Department of Auiche. The occupation lasted from four in the morning until four in the afternoon. During the same, the soldiers committed numerous abuses and attacks against the men and women of the village. Four peasants of this place were publicly tortured and assassinated by the army. These four Indian peasants were burned alive before their families and the rest of the community. Before their deaths, stakes were driven into their rectums, ears, mouths and eyes. The names of the four peasants tortured and burned correspond to two brothers by the name of Chavez, and another man by the name of Morales and another Tzoy. After the massacre and numerous threats, the army withdrew.

August - The town of Cotzal: In the first day of the month of August, the information organs of Guatemala transmitted an official notice of the army, in which it is communicated to the people that in the town of Cotzal, guerrilla forces of the Guerrilla Army of the poor attacked the military garrison of that town with the results of three officials of the army killed and thirty guerrillas of the revolutionaries.

The truth of these acts is the following: On the said day the guerrilla forces attacked the military garrison which for five days had committed dozens of assassinations and rapes in said town. In this attack, four officers and forty soldiers of the army died. Various hours after this attack, military troops from other bases entered and occupied the town of Cotzal. By force they gathered the population of the town in the plaza and shot sixty peasants publicly of that place, threatening that if another soldier died in that municipality, sixty women would be killed and the next time, sixty children. All the people killed were defenseless peasants. Not one guerrilla was killed.

The persecution by the army of Quiche continues against the people and belongings of the Church. In spite of the fact that on the 20th of July, the Bishop, priests and nuns had to abandon the diocese, pressured by the death of two priests and other attempted assassinations, including that of the Bishop, the army is not satisfied. Around the 3rd and 4th of August, the army violently assaulted and occupied the rectory of Cotzal and the boarding school of the Dominican Sisters in Chichicasterango. On Sunday, the 3rd, in the parish of Zacualpa, the christian communities because of the forced absence of the priests, determined that a catechist could perform the baptisms. In the afternoon of the same day, armed troops walked through the town looking for that catechist to kidnap him or kill him, because according to them, the laws of the Guatemalan army prohibit Catechists to baptize. Fortunately they did not find him.

MASSACRE IN GUATEMALA

MORE THAN 100 NATIVE PEOPLE KILLED!

More than 100 Indian peasants were reported killed in what was described as an ambush by landowners and police in the small town of Panzos in the northern province of Alta Verapaz. Panzos is located about 200 kilometers north of Guatemala City. According to the Latin America Bureau (LAB) in London, several hundred Indian peasants from the surrounding villages had come to Panzos in order to protest to the local authorities against the persistent attempts of the big landowners to remove them from the land they and their families have lived on for generations.

The official account, released by the Guatemalan Ministry of Defense, states that 43 were killed and 17 wounded, besides the 7 soldiers who were wounded, "when armed peasants staged a surprise attack on the garrison in Panzos." In a declaration, the Government accused "left-wing guerrillas that operate in the northern provinces of Guatemala and incite the peasants to invade private estates." The English Latin America Political Report asserted that President Kjell Laugerud Garcia should have directly accused Cuba's Fidel Castro and the guerrilla movement EGP (the Guerrilla Army of the Poor) as well as other "subversive elements" such as Catholic and Protestant priests, of standing behind the events which led to the bloodshed. It has been urged that such elements have been urging the Indians to take over privately owned land.

Unofficial versions, however, state that the protesting peasants, who had come with their wives and children, were met by a group of armed landowners on the market place in Panzos. During the ensuing collision, the landowners, according to LAB, fired on the unarmed peasants. Thereafter, the soldiers from the local garrison joined in.

The peasants fled in panic. More than 100 were killed in the shooting, or drowned in the nearby Polochic River, in their desperate attempts to escape the carnage. Several hundreds, it is reported, were wounded. Many fled into the wooded hills near the city.

Amnesty International reported that the North Guatemalan city of Panzos, where more than 100 Indian peasants were killed on May 29th, has been cut off from the outside world in order to prevent the visit of observers, especially from foreign countries. According to Amnesty International, there were 25 women and 5 children among the dead.

Amnesty International and local church and humanitarian organizations fear that the closing of Panzos, now occupied by anti-guerrilla units, will mean that the wounded peasants who did not escape from the town, will be tortured by the army, the anti-guerrilla soldiers, or the local land-owners and the authorities. This is said to be a normal procedure in Guatemala, where the authorities very seldom admit the existence of political prisoners. Over the last ten years, at least 20,000 individuals have been murdered or disappeared.

The massacre has brought along strong protests from a large number of organizations in Guatemala. Students and workers arranged a protest demonstration in the capital on June 1, and labor unions, church organizations, and student organizations have demanded a thorough investigation of the affair.

The land problem is not new in Guatemala, but it has intensified in recent years as big corporations and large landowners move to gain control over more land. The land is coveted largely as a source of production of export crops (cocoa, coffee, bananas, cotton, etc.) But removing the Indians from the land is also a way of forcing them into the labor market, making them directly dependent on wage labor on the big estates and plantations. In this way, the Indians are forced to become part of the proletariat, and their lands and labor will be exploited in the interests of national and international monetary interests.

And in Alta Verapaz, a new element has come into the picture. The large oil deposits in neighbouring Mexico have been proven to originate from oilstrata that extend into the subsoil of Northern Guatemala and Southern Belize (which is claimed by Guatemala.) In some parts of the very thinly populated northern province of El Peten, oil has been found and exploitation has started. However, in order to get any profit from the oil, it must be transported to the center of the country. This is to be accomplished by means of a pipeline that is to pass through Alta Verapaz, including the Panzos district. Oil prospecting is presently in progress in Alta Verapaz.



"They are children of shy smiles, peace, love, and truth."

The Panzos area, like the rest of Alta Verapaz as well as Quiche, has become a boom area — a focal point for government development programs including land colonization schemes and a transnational highway. Much of the recent interest stems from the discovery of large nickel and oil deposits in the area, now being exploited by transnational corporations. The value of land has skyrocketed accordingly, and large landowners have moved to evict the Kekchi Indian peasants who have scratched out a living there for over a century. The government "agrarian reform" agency, INTA, has collaborated with the large landowners, giving them legal title to the land. Significantly, the head of INTA is the former president's brother. The Minister of Defense also owns large properties in the area.

Oil is behind the present conflict in Alta Verapaz. The projected pipeline and wildcat drilling have meant that prices for land have begun to rise. The big landowners, expecting even higher land prices, often try to drive the Indian peasants from the land. They are assisted in this effort by the Guatemalan military forces. General Romeo Lucas Garcia, who has succeeded Kjell Laugerud as President of Guatemala, is one of the big landowners in the Alta Verapaz province. He is considered a conservative.

It is very difficult for the Indian people of Guatemala to defend their land rights. Many of the Indians do not possess titles to their lands, and they face almost overwhelming power wielded by the huge landowners, the corporations, and the Guatemalan authorities. Native people in Guatemala often have a traditional and prescriptive right to the land they live on and cultivate, and Guatemala has often failed to recognize that kind of right to land. Throughout most of Guatemala's history, that right has not been systematically challenged. Until now. (It is true that several hundred thousand Indians have lost their land over the past 24 years, but it has mainly been land acquired under the land reform of

1951. This reform was revoked after a CIA-organized invasion by mercenaries brought a right-wing regime to power in 1954.)

In addition to the conflict over land, the drastic rise in prices which Guatemala has experienced this Spring has also contributed to unrest not only among the Indian peasants, but also among the workers and other wage earners in the cities. The price of bread has gone up by 25%, sugar by 60%, electricity by 27%, city buses by 100%, and telephones by 40%. These price rises are especially disastrous for the hundreds of thousands of small farmers and landworkers that almost completely depend on the extremely modest wages they can earn on the plantations, a few months a year, during the harvest season. Their situation becomes desperate when the land is either taken away from them or becomes so expensive that they are no longer able to pay the taxes imposed on them.

These pressures have produced not only demonstrations, but also a guerrilla movement which operates with success in many places. This is only possible because it finds support among the local Indian population, and because the peasants, since the 1960s, are acquainted with guerrilla warfare.

As eviction attempts increased over the last few months, the peasants organized and tried to defend their rights through legal channels. The only answers they received were false promises and increased repression. Most recently, three peasant leaders were kidnapped. On May 29, a group of 700 to 1500 men, women and children marched to the town plaza to inquire about the fate of their three missing compañeros and to ask that their rights to the land be respected.

The army and landowners were ready for them. According to peasants who escaped from the scene, a group of eight landowners had brought 150 soldiers from the military base at Zacapa and were waiting for the peasant group to arrive. The soldiers opened up on the crowd with machine guns and grenades.

Some people, including five women with babies, drowned as they tried to escape across the Polochic River. Others were hunted down or died for lack of medical attention, since the army barred the Red Cross from entering. The dead were quickly buried in a mass grave. Flavio Monzon, a landowner and local chief of the ultra-right wing MLN party, claimed to have been authorized by the Guatemalan President and the Minister of the Interior to kill the peasants. (He later denied his statements.)



although the press and others have pointed out how unlikely it is that peasants would attack a military outpost armed only with machetes and accompanied by their children.

The massacre at Panzos has caused widespread outrage in Guatemala. On June 8, 30,000 people marched through Guatemala City, culminating a week of demonstrations and protests by student, labor, church, peasant and professional groups. The protesters have been asking for a thorough investigation to determine who is responsible for the massacre and demanding the resignation of Defense Minister Spiegeler. Collections of medicine and money have been taken up for the survivors, especially the orphans.



"It's not right for us to be assassinated and kidnapped by the army, which we are told is here to defend us, when in reality it is we who must defend ourselves against the army."

These words were part of an open letter to Guatemala's President Laugerud sent in May by Indian peasants in northern Quiché Province.

peasants are regrouping in the hills to "attack" again, the army has occupied the entire area. Helicopters are tracking down those peasants who managed to run to safety in the hills, while Navy boats patrol the Polochic River. Press and medical personnel have been escorted in only once; leaders of popular organizations have been denied entrance. Soldiers from bases at Coban, Zacapa and Poptun patrol the streets and hills — among them a large contingent of anti-guerrilla Special Forces known as kaibiles.

Many of the protesters pointed out that Panzos forms part of a larger pattern of persecution and attacks against the peasantry, stemming from resistance to miserable living and working conditions: While one percent of the population owns nearly 80 percent of the land, most peasants live on tiny, eroded plots which don't produce enough for them to feed their families. Three quarters of all Guatemalan children under five are malnourished. Many peasants turn to seasonal work on the large coffee, cotton and cattle farms, earning dollar-a-day wages and living in open stalls.

The bishop and priests of Quiché Province concur, denouncing the "systematic and implacable extermination of community leaders and church laypersons in northern Quiché" by the army and private goon squads of the landowners. Over 100 people have been killed over the last three years in the Ixil and Ixcán regions, prompting letters of protest from the peasants and Church. The Committee for Justice and Peace, a church-related group, writes: "We also know of the disappearance and assassination of several people in Tactic of Alta Verapaz, on the southern coast, in Tecpan and other places; of the treacherous attack on a peasant in San Martín Jilotepeque and many other cases which appear every day in the newspapers together with the news of evictions of peasants from their lands, price rises for everything, and low wages; and the forced recruitment of peasant youths for the army, which takes them to the barracks and then forces them to kill their own people..."

Gen. Romeo Lucas Garcia will be forced to try to resolve this aggravated land conflict. And it is a difficult conflict to resolve, because there are powerful economic interests behind the efforts to secure the land of the

ultra-reactionary policy of the different governments has surfaced. Guatemala has seen not only protest demonstrations in the cities, but also gestures of sympathy, strikes, and the like. The Guatemalan landowner-general from Alta Verapaz has inherited a political estate in bankruptcy, a fact strongly stressed by the massacre in Panzos.

(The information in this report was largely drawn from the June 1978 IWGIA NEWSLETTER, to whom we are grateful for this information.)



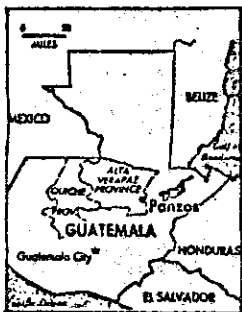
Guatemala Massacre of Indians

GUATEMALA CITY — It took just a few minutes of solid, frenzied gunfire for the Guatemalan Army to clear the village square at Panzos. When the shooting stopped, bodies of children, women and men lay bleeding among the trees. Survivors, many of them wounded, had fled screaming down the sand roads. Five terror-stricken women holding babies had jumped into the nearby Polochic river and drowned.

It has become known as the "Panzos massacre," this bloodbath in a Kekchi Indian village, 80 miles northeast of here on the morning of May 29. As is so often the case when armed military, unarmed civilians and mass graves are involved, casualty figures were disputed. The government said 36 people were killed and as many were wounded. Catholic Church workers in the area prepared a provisional list of 114 dead. The Red Cross was unsure.

The army had kept out their ambulances until late afternoon. By then, recalled Juan Cux, whose father had been piled, lifeless, on a truck, "they had thrown all the dead into a big hole."

Guatemala, though perennially troubled by political violence and for three decades described as "dangerously polarized," has been badly shaken by this mass killing of Indian families. Violent death usually comes in smaller numbers here, and preferably at night, when the assassins remain unidentified.



Land claims by the Indians triggered the massacre although it is only the climax to more than two years of tension, murders and evictions in the isolated provinces of Quiché and Alta Verapaz. At stake are the lands inhabited by Kekchi and Quiché Mayan Indians for longer than they can remember. But their often communally held *fincas* never got the titles by which western society in the capital regards property.

Then, a decade ago, these unappealing highlands and jungles proved to hold oil and nickel deposits. A nickel mine opened, and the government brought in electricity and started building a highway.

In a country where 2 percent of the population already holds 62 percent of arable land, it was easy for wealthy people to move in and start buying up large tracts of land around the highway. "The government made one great mistake there, it gave away or sold land titles to outsiders," said an official of the Agrarian Reform Institute. "It went to politicians, the rich, the military. They all grabbed what they could. There are large untouchable estates we call 'the zone of the generals.'" These new titles, he said, now made squatters of the illiterate, unassuming Indians.

The event at Panzos brought tens of thousands of protesters out to rallies in Guatemala City. Students, members of religious groups, lawyers and unions shouted "Cowards, assassins" in front of the government palace. A week-long barrage of newspaper advertisements denounced the government's versions which alternately said the Indian peasants had "attacked the army garrison" — although Panzos has no military garrison — and that there had been a peasant uprising, instigated by Leftist guerrillas, Fidel Castro and religious groups.

As peaced together from interviews with military spokesmen and Kekchi survivors, Panzos seems to be another clampdown on the country's Indian majority which is slowly starting to assert its rights. Over the last three years, the government has slightly eased the repression of peasant organizations, which brought bitter

By Marlise Simons

protests from the elite. "The elite in Guatemala are not ordinary conservatives," a well-placed Western diplomat here commented. "They are close to neanderthals."

The week before the massacre, wealthy landowners who had traditionally enjoyed government support called in the military, claiming Indian peasants were going to take over the Panzos village hall and invade lands. The Indians wanted to discuss their land tenure problems once again with the mayor. The mayor, not an Indian, reportedly told one of the Indian leaders to come "On Monday, but come in a large group, otherwise you may be attacked."

On Monday morning, some 700 Kekchi Indians from hamlets nearby gathered on the village square, the men carrying their tools, and the women holding babies. "We did not go to attack, we would not have brought our women and children," said one of the Indian leaders, now hiding outside Panzos. "We were going to hand over a petition" to the mayor.

But instead of the mayor, the Kekchis found soldiers holed up in the town hall. There was some pushing and shoving at the door. Then the soldiers opened fire. The shooting came from everywhere — from the rooftops, the windows and from the houses around the square," recalled one Kekchi survivor, whose left elbow and knee were shattered by bullets.

Several embarrassed government officials have condemned the

massacre. One is the brother of President Kjell Laugerud, who codirects the land reform institute and blamed the incidents on "the landowners' greed."

Among those here who support social and economic change, there is hope that Panzos has served to dramatize the plight of the country's Mayan descendants, who account for 3.5 million of Guatemala's 6.3 million population. Most of the Indians live on tiny patches of land or work in serflike conditions on huge estates, often for 25 cents a day. According to government statistics, 80 percent of their children under five suffer malnutrition and most of the adults do not speak Spanish, let alone read or write.

But foreign development experts here have little hope that the country's small military and landed elite will tolerate much change. General Romeo Lucas, who took over the presidency on July 1, and comes from an area not far from Panzos, has promised to improve the Indian's lot.

State Department officials have said privately that Guatemala has one of the worst human rights records in this hemisphere. "Violence has diminished somewhat in the last few years, but every month there are still 25 to 30 unexplained political deaths in Guatemala," one official said recently. "This does not come from the government per se, but from people in the intimidation business who are officially tolerated."