

September 11, 2006

GUATEMALA: MORE DAMN 'DEVELOPMENT' PROJECTS ñ The XALALA Project

For many years, RA has supported efforts to get reparations for the massacres and forced evictions associated with the Chixoy hydro-electric dam project (1975-1985) funded by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. Even as the WB and IDB refuse to remedy the crimes and abuses associated with that 'development' project, the Guatemalan government proceeds with more large-scale dam-hydroelectric 'development' (read: 'big business'] projects on the very same Chixoy river.

We reproduce a Mother Jones article concerning the planned 'Xalala dam project' that will destroy the environment and well-being of poor and indigenous returned-refugee communities, including that of COPAL AA where RA has been supporting community development and education projects for many years.

WHAT TO DO: see below.

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GUATEMALA: ON THE BANKS OF THE CHIXOY: AS GUATEMALA PLANS A MASSIVE NEW DAM, A VILLAGE OF SURVIVORS RISKS LOSING EVERYTHING ñ AGAIN
By Michael Lumsden, Mother Jones Magazine, November/December 2005
Issue, www.motherjones.com

A CROOKED CANDLE CAST SLOTTES of light across the cement floor of Diego Perez Andresí two-room house. Newspaper pages with soccer players and swimsuit models dotted the cinder-block walls. The only furniture was a small table, two wooden stools, and the bed where I would spend the night: two worn slabs of wood covered with a thick purple and white woven blanket, no pillow. A thin sheet separated me from the space where my 33-year-old host, his wife, and their three young children would sleep.

A lean, nimble man with hunched shoulders and high cheekbones, Perez earns a little more than \$100 a year selling cardamom. When he first arrived in this remote Guatemalan village 10 years ago, he couldn't have imagined living in a house this comfortable.

He had spent nearly half his life in a refugee camp in Mexico, one of the million Guatemalans who had fled the vicious military campaign to purge the countryside of leftist guerrillas.

COPAL AA RETURNED-REFUGEE COMMUNITY

Today, the Perez family is among 100 or so families of former refugees who have made their home in Copal AA (pronounced KO-pa-LA), a tiny town along the banks of central Guatemala's Chixoy River. But after a decade of calm, the people here are again at risk of losing everything. The danger this time is not men with guns, but the forces of progress, embodied in a dam that threatens to uproot them.

One afternoon in early April, Perez took me to a hill overlooking his quiet jungle home. Less than 30 miles from the Mexican border, Copal AA is not unlike countless other villages throughout Guatemala. Its 500 residents live in metal-roofed houses with small garden plots scattered along winding dirt paths. The nearest town with a marketplace, shops, and a pharmacy is about 15 miles up the Chixoy, a major tributary of the Usumacinta River ó Central America's largest.

Speaking Spanish with a faint accent of Mam, his native Mayan language, Perez told me the history of the village. In 1995, a collection of indigenous families who had returned from Mexico settled on the site of a former coffee plantation. Originally from a handful of provinces and speaking three different Mayan dialects, they named their new community Copal AA, a Spanish-Mayan hybrid that loosely translates as "cup of water."

One town elder told me it simply means "surrounded by water."

Since Guatemala's 36-year civil war ended in 1996, Copal AA has been a peaceful, if not prosperous, place to live. Coffee remains the area's main cash crop; many families sell cardamom as well, using the extra income to buy luxuries like soap, sugar, and batteries. There's a small primary and secondary school, a health clinic, and a solar-powered radio transmitter in the center of town.

Though the Guatemalan government has declared economic development a top priority, few benefits have yet to trickle down to Copal AA. It remains unelectrified; its drinking water comes from a nearby stream and is unsafe unless it's boiled for several minutes. During the eight-month rainy season, reaching the nearest hospital requires a four-hour hike followed by a bone-jarring, two-hour truck ride along unpaved tracks.

For Clemente Velásquez López, the town's unofficial historian, development for Copal AA means getting the basics: having a truly regional hospital, having access roads into our communities, having electricity. But appeals to the government for these essential services have been futile, he said.

What you see as Copal AA today hasn't come from government aid. It's come almost entirely from international help, solidarity from people who visit us.

THE XALALI DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

In February, one of the few literate men in Copal AA happened to pick up the newspaper Prensa Libre, where an article named specific towns likely to be affected by a series of government-approved hydroelectric dams.

That's how the residents of the town surrounded by water learned that a dam was to be built on their lifeline, just a few miles upstream. "We weren't informed through other ways. Only through the Prensa," recalled Hugo Ramirez Caal, the spokesman and translator for the town council.

Known as the Xalalí Project, the dam is one of eight private hydroelectric projects being promoted by the government. Standing between 860 and 950 feet tall, the dam would generate around 15 percent of the country's electricity. It was pure chance that Copal AA learned of these plans, Ramirez said. "Never did we see it in our own language."

THE CHIXOY PROJECT

It wasn't the first time the Guatemalan government had moved ahead with a massive hydroelectric project without notifying the people living in its vicinity. In 1975, a dam funded by the World Bank [and Inter-American Development Bank] started to go up on the Chixoy, upriver from the Xalalí site. Nearby communities didn't learn that they would have to move until two years after construction had begun.

Following several years of negotiations and false promises, the government tried a new tactic to clear the area. The military was in the midst of waging a scorched-earth campaign across the countryside, destroying whatever or whomever presented an obstacle to finding the guerrillas.

Between February and September 1982, the army carried out a series of massacres in the Chixoy basin, killing more than 400 people, including 35 children orphaned in the first series of attacks. The government then offered to pay those who volunteered to relocate less than \$5 per acre.

CAFTA, FREE TRADE & DAMS

On a hot afternoon this spring, hundreds of people blocked the intersection outside police headquarters in Guatemala City. The sidewalks were awash in reds, magentas, purples, and yellows as women and children in traditional Mayan dress sat on the curbs, eating tortillas, sipping Fanta, and listening to the speakers atop a truck parked in the middle of the street. Policemen with shields and batons waited close by.

Nearly a month earlier, the Guatemalan Congress had ratified the Central American Free Trade Agreement, despite mass protests. Today, the demonstrators were asking legislators to reject the trade pact's domestic counterpart, a proposed law that would hasten the privatization of the country's remaining public services.

The privatization law, CAFTA, and foreign-funded projects like Xalal are all part of an official campaign to attract foreign investment in hopes of boosting Guatemala's sagging economy. The politicians and business leaders supporting this effort believe they are doing the right thing, according to Tania Palencia Prado, a columnist for the newspaper Siglo Veintiuno, but they're following a route that's failed before. "It's an old idea that they are now modernizing," she explained. "They think progress is achieved by opening poor nations to products from the north. We've lived this way for more than 500 years."

The current push for free trade and private investment is being carried out in the name of the rural poor, yet its intended beneficiaries are rarely told how such policies might affect them, she said. "That's the main problem," Palencia sighed, lighting a cigarette. "The principal abuse on the part of the government is not informing people."

BIG BUSINESS, BAD DEVELOPMENT

Like CAFTA, the new dam is being pushed through with little regard for those it will ostensibly help. Sitting on the terrace outside his second-floor apartment in the capital, José Manuel Chacún described the ruinous impact it would have on villages like Copal AA. Chacún is a political cartoonist and a leader of Colectivo MadreSelva, the Mother Jungle Collective, an environmental group that has unearthed what little is known about Xalal.

A thick beard covered much of his face, but Chacún's eyes flashed urgently as he described how the proposed dam would flood more than 25 square miles ó including at least nine villages ó and dry up the river for another 15 towns or so downstream, including Copal AA. Because so little information about the dam has been released ó not even the name of the company constructing it ó no one knows exactly where its electricity will go.

"What's certain is that it will be sold," Chacún said. What's also

likely, he added, is that the power "won't go for the people who need it."

Two months after learning about the dam, around 30 leaders from nearby villages gathered at Copal AA's town hall to discuss what to do next. Some had spent hours slashing their way through the jungle to get there. Though many couldn't read or write, all understood what a dam would mean for their daily lives: villages upstream would be flooded and forced to relocate; those downstream would see their most reliable source of transportation and irrigation evaporate.

Several weeks earlier, representatives from Copal AA and 20 neighboring villages had sent a letter to the Guatemalan Congress, demanding more information about the project. Even now, they have received no acknowledgment of their concerns.

Anger about the snub hung thick in the humid air. But there was also a quiet acceptance of the fight likely to come ó a fight not for electricity or better roads, but simply to defend what little they had.

An elder leaned into the circle and clicked away in Q'eqchi'. "During the war, indigenous communities were most affected by the conflict and now, with these dams, it's the indigenous areas that are going to be most affected again," he said. "They no longer come to kill us with bullets. It's no longer with war that they want to kill indigenous people. Now it's with grand economic plans that they want to finish us off."

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WHAT TO DO:

- The #1 line of work in favour of global justice and equality is to directly support local organizations so that they can continue to lead their own struggles in defense and promotion of development, the environment and human rights. MAKE TAX-CHARITABLE DONATIONS to Rights Action in Canada and the U.S., to help support community-based organizations in countries where we work (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Haiti, Chiapas (Mexico);
- Get involved in education and activism work in your home community concerning the negative impacts of global economic/ ìdevelopmentî and military power abuse whose policies and actions are controlled by the ìG8î governments, including Canada and the U.S.;
- Consider coming to these counties on an educational-activist delegation;

- Get on our email and snail-mail lists: info@rightsaction.org.

Rights Action, with its main office in Guatemala, channels your donations to over 50 community development, environment and human rights organizations in Guatemala, Chiapas, Honduras, El Salvador and Haiti. We carry out education & activist work in the USA and Canada (and take educational delegations to these countries) to learn about and get involved in good work for global human rights, a healthy environment and a just economic development model.

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