

FEBRUARY 14, 2012 – 4 YEARS OF ILLEGAL DETENTION

Demand Freedom for Political Prisoner Ramiro Choc, a Mayan Qeqchi Community Leader

New video, upcoming delegation, other opportunities to take ACTION
www.GuatemalaSolidarityProject.org

February 14 will mark four years since indigenous q'eqchi' leader Ramiro Choc was kidnapped and illegally detained by the Guatemalan government. He was not arrested, but pulled off a bus by soldiers who said they would kill him. When news of his illegal detention became public, he was kept alive and held for several days in a secret location. Eventually the government transferred him to prison custody and accused him of numerous crimes which they knew he didn't commit. He has since survived threats, beatings, poison, denial of medical attention and numerous other hardships.

The Guatemala Solidarity Project –GSP- is extremely concerned about Choc's immediate safety. In August, 2011, Choc was transferred to Guatemala's notorious Pavon Prison. Pavon is infamous for the many assassinations and massacres of prisoners which have occurred there. Part of our interview with Choc after the transfer can be viewed:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vi37nzXfa4Q>

Choc has needed to use extreme caution and planning to stay alive at Pavon. In recent days his activities have been closely monitored by a suspicious prisoner who was transferred into Choc's cell block. Choc has been eligible for release since February 2011, but 8 times the Guatemalan courts have refused to even consider legal motions calling for his release.

Since Choc was arrested the government has accelerated its pillaging of indigenous lands in various regions of Guatemala, burning hundreds of homes and destroying thousands of acres of subsistence crops in Ramiro Choc's region of eastern Guatemala. Choc's dynamic arguments in favor of indigenous rights, his ability to unite marginalized populations, and his courageous commitment to continue organizing in the face of repeated threats made him an enemy of wealthy corrupt landowners.

In the 1990s and in the first decade of the 21s century, Choc escaped numerous assassination attempts, sometimes being left with bullet wounds on his neck and other parts of his body. But he refused to be silent and continued to risk his life by working with indigenous and peasant communities to reclaim their rights and denounce Government violence.

Now it is our turn to refuse to be silent, and to raise our voices together with thousands of Guatemalan peasants to demand: Freedom for Ramiro Choc!

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

FEBRUARY 14, 2012: FAST AND CONGRESSIONAL BRIEFING!

For the second year we will be helping to organize a fast on the anniversary of Choc's illegal detainment. We want your participation! For more information:
<http://guatemalalolidarityproject.org/fastforramiro.htm>

On the same day, there will be a briefing in US congress organized by the Guatemala Human Rights Commission. If you are participating in the fast – or even if you are not – please call your member of congress and ask that they send someone to attend this important briefing. The US government played a lead role in building the Guatemalan judicial system, and new Guatemalan President and US Army School of the Americas graduate Otto Perez Molina is pushing for increased military relations between Guatemala and the US. It is a critical time for US congress to be informed about what is really happening in Guatemala. You can tell your member of Congress that the briefing will be held at 4:00pm in Cannon room 121. There is more information about the hearing at:
<http://guatemalalolidarityproject.org/february14briefing.htm>

While the fast will be a form of pressuring for Choc's release, we also plan to use the fast to challenge ourselves to follow Choc's example of working courageously for justice.

SUPPORT THE RAMIRO CHOC DEFENSE FUND

There is a critical need for funds to file legal motions in support of Choc's release. Choc can not win freedom without these legal actions. Please consider making a donation of any size by writing a check to "UPAVIM Community Development Foundation." You MUST write "Ramiro Choc" in the notes/memo section of the check to ensure that it doesn't go to another fund. Send checks to UPAVIM, c/o Laurie Levinger, 28 McKenna Rd, Norwich, VT 05055. To donate via paypal visit <http://upavim.pursuantgroup.net/english/donate.htm>. You will see the paypal link, and YOU MUST include the words "Ramiro Choc Defense" in a note to ensure the funding is delivered correctly.

JOIN OUR UPCOMING SOLIDARITY DELEGATION

Our solidarity delegations often meet with Choc and other political prisoners in Guatemala. Our next delegation, "Struggling for Life in the Face of Terrorism," is scheduled for March 3-11. More information: <http://guatemalalolidarityproject.org/delegations.htm>

SIGN PETITION TO FREE RAMIRO CHOC:

<http://www.change.org/petitions/free-indigenous-leader-and-political-prisoner-ramiro-choc>

WHO IS RAMIRO CHOC?

Ramiro Choc is a Q'eqchi' peasant leader from northeastern Guatemala. With courage, dynamic organizing skills and commitment to social and environmental justice he has been a leader in numerous successful grassroots struggles.

Choc was born in extreme poverty in a plantation within the municipality of El Estor, Izabal. His parents had been born slaves. At age 17 he became a catechist for the Catholic Church, teaching a liberation theology that people should not only have justice after death in heaven but also during life on earth. This ideology brought him great support among the peasant population but not among all of the church hierarchy.

After nearly thirteen years as a catechist, the gap between Choc's liberation theology and the conservative doctrine of many of his superiors became too large. Choc was then hired by

the National Indigenous and Peasant Coordinating Committee (CONIC) as an organizer, working primarily with indigenous communities involved in land struggles.

With CONIC, Choc earned a reputation for his firm defense of the rights of indigenous communities. After approximately seven years, he left CONIC and helped form a new organization, Encuentro Campesino (Peasant Encounter/Gathering).

Through Encuentro Campesino Choc continued to have success in organizing indigenous Q'eqchi' communities in support of their rights. He worked not only with Q'eqchi' communities but also with ladino (of Spanish descent) and Garifuna (of African descent) peasants. His ability to unite diverse marginalized communities in defense of their rights grew to threaten the dominance of the government and wealthy landowners who looked for an opportunity to silence him.

After surviving numerous assassination attempts, on February 14, 2008, Choc was kidnapped by members of the military. He was taken to a secluded location for five days, and then sentenced to six years in prison in a farcical trial.

THE "CASE" AGAINST RAMIRO CHOC

Ramiro Choc was convicted of trumped up charges such as occupying and stealing land, aggravated robbery, and illegal detention. The government lacked the evidence to prove their case in court, and the charges are clearly based on Choc's political activism.

The government claims that in late 2007, in the community of Barrio Buena Vista la Esperanza, Choc detained a group of police and stole their weapons. But the government's own evidence corroborates the fact that Choc wasn't in the area when the confrontation took place. That morning, armed men attacked the community of Bella Vista, shooting at unarmed villagers, both men and children. The armed aggressors were employed by Ileana Lemus Solórzano de Castellán, a wealthy woman with strong government ties. Castellán ordered the attack in an attempt to steal land from the community.

The community was able to detain the attackers, and the government unsuccessfully attempted to negotiate their release. Eventually the Governor contacted Choc, a well known mediator, and requested that he come to help resolve the situation as a negotiator. Hours later Choc arrived, and he successfully negotiated a nonviolent end to the crisis. He signed the final agreement between representatives of the community and the government, which the prosecution uses as proof that it was he who detained the men. But the same agreement was signed by the mayor, governor, representatives of neighboring communities and representatives of numerous government institutions. Instead of being thanked for mediating a nonviolent solution to a violent conflict – he was arrested and is sleeping on a cement floor in prison.

As mentioned above, in 2008, months after the attack on Bella Vista, Choc was dragged off a public bus by soldiers who told him they would kill him. They took him to a secluded location, and only after news of his kidnapping had reached the outside did they say they had decided not to execute him. After five days, Choc was taken to court. Since being imprisoned, Choc has suffered beatings, poisoned food, and then months in isolation.

As national and international pressure continued to build against the government, Choc was transferred out of isolation and into Sector 12 of Guatemala City's Zone 18 Jail. Then in late 2011, Choc was transferred to Guatemala's notorious Pavon Prison. Pavon is famous in

Guatemala as the home of assassinations and massacres of prisoners. On numerous occasions, prisoners in cases connected to government corruption have been transferred to the prison and executed while there. Shortly after Choc's transfer, the director of the Pavon Prison told Choc's lawyer and an international solidarity activist that it would be easy to order Choc's murder.

RAMIRO CHOC'S IMPRISONMENT AND REPRESSION AGAINST PEASANT AND INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Choc was sentenced to 6 years, which under Guatemalan law meant that he was eligible for conditional release for good behavior after three years. However, the government has refused to follow the law and allow his release.

February 14, 2011 marked the first day that Choc became eligible for release. Indigenous leaders and solidarity activists planned to hold nonviolent actions on that day to demand Ramiro's freedom. But on February 12, three Encuentro Campesino leaders, close friends of Ramiro who had recently visited him, disappeared. Their bodies were found on February 14, floating in a large body of water near the Caribbean Coast. They had been shot dozens of times.

Choc's imprisonment and the February 12 massacre of his friends and fellow indigenous leaders are part of the systematic repression of indigenous and peasant communities in Guatemala. Choc has courageously stood up to this repression and continues to speak out while in prison despite the great threat. Many other indigenous leaders who have visited Ramiro have been assassinated, in addition to the three young leaders who were killed earlier this year.

For example, on March 15, 2008, Choc's close friend and well respected peasant leader Mario Caal Bolom was murdered. The government's own human rights ombudsman's office concluded that he had been tortured and murdered by the police. On September 27, 2009, Choc's brother-in-law Adolfo Ich Xaman, another committed indigenous leader, was brutally murdered and mutilated by the private security of a multinational corporation.

The assassinations of Choc's friends, like his imprisonment, are part of the government's criminalization of indigenous and peasant human rights defenders. This repression seeks to silence indigenous and peasant communities so that the government can continue its almost daily violent "evictions" of indigenous and peasant communities. These attacks are carried out by soldiers, police, private security and paramilitaries. The purpose is to remove communities from their ancestral lands so that private individuals and corporations can profit from Guatemala's rich natural resources.

These "evictions" usually include the burning of peasant homes and crops. Most indigenous communities in Guatemala rely on subsistence agriculture to survive. The evictions leave families facing hunger and a desperate struggle for survival. For example, in March, 2011 in Panzos, in northeast Guatemala, government and private security forces "evicted" 15 communities and destroyed over 1,000 acres of corn and other basic grains.

The corn was nearing harvest, and the indigenous communities that had planted and worked the fields were anxiously waiting the food it would provide. They were poor, but they were not starving. After the evictions, hundreds of families were left homeless and without food. Numerous community leaders were shot, imprisoned and/or murdered. Several people from the communities have since starved to death, and thousands are suffering the effects of

chronic malnutrition, such as stunted development, low energy and high susceptibility to illness. The land that they and their ancestors lived on is now being used to grow sugarcane and African palm for the production of biofuels.

In many parts of Guatemala, communities that were not rich but were at least void of starvation are now in a hunger crisis. This is in large part the result of the Central American Free Trade Agreement, the US Army School of the Americas, and other types of US-supported "economic development" and "security cooperation" which have been on the rise since the signing of the Peace Accords.

Ramiro Choc is a courageous leader whose only "crime" is eloquently speaking out against this violent pillaging of indigenous lands. We call for his immediate release, and for the end of government repression of indigenous and peasant communities.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: www.guatemalalSolidarityproject.org;
solidaridadguatemala@yahoo.com

Rights Action DELEGATION TO GUATEMALA, MARCH 10-17, 2012

"DAMS, MINING & AFRICAN PALM PRODUCTION - versus - COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT,
ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE & HUMAN RIGHTS"
Lead by Grahame Russell (Rights Action co-director). Information: info@rightsaction.org

TO MAKE TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS

for indigenous and campesino organizations working for community-controlled development, environmental justice, human rights & justice in Guatemala & Honduras (and also in Chiapas & el Salvador), make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:
UNITED STATES: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887
CANADA: 552 - 351 Queen St. E, Toronto ON, M5A-1T8

CREDIT-CARD DONATIONS can be made (anonymously): www.rightsaction.org
In Canada: <https://www.canadahelps.org/DonationDetails.aspx?cookieCheck=true>
In USA: <https://npo.networkforgood.org/Donate/Donate.aspx?npoSubscriptionId=488>
DONATIONS OF STOCK can be made (anonymously): info@rightsaction.org

EDUCATION – GET INFORMED / GET INVOLVED

SPEAKERS: Contact us to plan educational presentations in your home, your community, school or university, place of worship
EDUCATIONAL DELEGATIONS TO GUATEMALA & HONDURAS: Form your own group or join one of our delegations to learn first hand about community development, human rights and environmental struggles
NEWS: www.democracynow.org / <http://therealnews.com/t2/> / www.upsidedownworld.org / www.dominionpaper.ca
BOOKS:
Eduardo Galeano's "Open Veins of Latin America"
Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States"
James Loewen's "Lies My Teacher Told Me"
Naomi Klein's "The Shock Doctrine"

Paolo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed"
Dr Seuss's "Horton Hears A Who"

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