

## **Dissecting a This American Life report about “What Happened At Dos Erres” in Guatemala**

By Grahame Russell, June 4, 2012

### **WHAT HAPPENED AT DOS ERRES**

This American Life radio report (59 minutes), May 25, 2012

<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/465/what-happened-at-dos-erres>

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### **This American Life radio report:**

#### **DIGGING FOR TRUTH ABOUT THE “DOS ERRES” MASSACRE IN GUATEMALA, NOT ABOUT THE COMPLICITE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES**

by Grahame Russell, [info@rightsaction.org](mailto:info@rightsaction.org)

Rights Action recommends listening to a very moving 59 minute This American Life (TAL) radio report “What Happened At Dos Erres?” (May 25, 2012, <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/465/what-happened-at-dos-erres>) that describes a particular massacre in Guatemala – the Dos Erres [Dos–Errez] massacre of some 200 people in 1982; the report describes courageous efforts in Guatemala, since the mid-1990s, to seek truth and justice for this massacre. This radio report also presents the extraordinary story of one of the few survivors of this massacre, a 3 year old boy Oscar, and the reuniting of this boy, 30 years later, with his father.

Since 1995, Rights Action has been funding communities in Guatemala working tirelessly and courageously for truth, memory and justice: carrying out mass grave exhumations; carrying out re-burial ceremonies, once the remains of their loved ones are returned to them by the FAFG (Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation); constructing commemorative monuments for massacred family members and loved ones; and, pursuing justice in Guatemalan and international courts. Rights Action funds the courageous work of FAMDEGUA (Family members of the Disappeared), profiled in this report though lamentably not mentioned by name, and other grassroots organizations, along these lines.

### **DOS ERRES MASSACRE**

In 1982, the Guatemalan military massacred some 200 people in the village of Dos Erres (department of Peten), as part of their country-wide State repression and terrorization plan of massacres against their own civilian population. In certain Mayan regions of the country, the repression reached the level of genocide. Like hundreds of massacres across Guatemala, the Dos Erres

massacre – carried out with mind-numbing savagery – killed the over 200 villagers and utterly destroyed future generations of the surviving family and community members, which was the intent of the repression.

In this context, the survival of, let alone reuniting of Oscar and his father – 30 years separated - is utterly amazing.

### **DE-CONTEXTUALIZED REPORT**

There are some minor points to clarify from the TAL report.

Firstly, as reported by the United Nations Truth Commission report, at least 200,000 were killed and at least 45,000 disappeared by the Guatemalan regime – the vast majority civilian, the majority Mayan.

Secondly, the Dos Erres massacre is not the first time that a few low-ranking material authors of massacres were found guilty, though it is one of the very few cases wherein any justice at all has been done. The Rio Negro massacres of some 444 Mayan Achi villagers - caused in large part due to the construction of the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank funded “Chixoy Dam” – was the first massacre case in Guatemala wherein a few low-ranking ‘material’ authors were found guilty and jailed.

Thirdly, the finding and reuniting of Oscar and his father was not crucial to success of the Dos Erres legal cases, both before the Inter-American Human Rights Commission and Court, and slowly, bit by bit, in the Guatemalan courts.

More importantly, it is worth emphasizing that Aura Elena, the founder of FAMDEGUA who is interviewed in the report, is certainly the crucial person in this entire struggle for truth, memory and justice for the Dos Erres massacre.

### **ABSENT – DEEPLY COMPLICITE ROLE OF UNITED STATES**

However, the major point I wish to comment on is that TAL completely factored out the extensive role the U.S. government has played for generations in funding, training and arming Guatemala’s military.

The listener is left profoundly moved by this amazing story of suffering, survival and partial family reunion, is left stunned at the brutal things that happened in a ‘far away’ country (Guatemala), and is left with no idea of the role the U.S. played in Guatemala as part of widespread American support for and involvement with brutal regimes throughout Latin America during the “cold war”.

The “Kaibiles” special forces that carried out the Dos Erres massacre (that this report focuses on), and that are responsible for some of the very worst

atrocities during Guatemala's State repression and terrorism against its own population, were (and are today) U.S. trained "special" forces. Near the end of the report, TAL interviews Guatemala's new President, former General Otto Perez Molina. Mentioning that Perez Molina was the highest ranking officer of the "Kaibiles", TAL does not report that Perez Molina received military and intelligence training in U.S. military schools, does not report that Perez Molina was a reported C.I.A. agent or "asset", and does not report that Perez Molina is widely alleged to be an intellectual author of the policy of massacres, genocide, during the worst years of massacres, genocide and State terrorism.

TAL is to be commended for airing this moving report, but I think it is incumbent on TAL to fully investigate and report on the extensive historical role of the U.S. supporting, empowering and collaborating with generations of brutal regimes in Guatemala, making possible and inevitable such atrocities as the Dos Erres massacre. Indeed, telling the full story would certainly expose listeners, in a more complete fashion, to this "American life".

*[Grahame Russell is a non-practicing Canadian lawyer, author, Adjunct Professor at the University of Northern British Columbia and, since 1995, co-director of Rights Action ([www.rightsaction.org](http://www.rightsaction.org)) that funds and supports community-controlled development, environmental justice and human rights projects in Guatemala and Honduras, as well as in Chiapas and El Salvador; and carries out education and activism work in the USA and Canada related to global human rights, enviro- and development issues. Grahame regularly writes and gives public presentations about these issues. ([info@rightsaction.org](mailto:info@rightsaction.org))]*

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Grahame Russell, [info@rightsaction.org](mailto:info@rightsaction.org)

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