

“It sounded like Christmas day fireworks going off, ... and we knew the Army had killed them all”

Day #1: [#CDNMiningImpunity](#) book project & research trip. By Grahame Russell

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May 14, 2017, on a ridge above the Chixoy dam flood basin, we attend the 35th anniversary of the “Los Encuentros” massacre, one of 5 large scale massacres committed in 1982 by the U.S.-backed Guatemala regime that killed some 450 Mayan Achi people from the village of Rio Negro.

The massacres – other killings and the forced evictions of dozens of Mayan villages – made way for the billion-dollar Chixoy dam investment project of the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the military regimes of the genocidal generals Lucas Garcia and Rios Montt.

At the time, and for years after, the World Bank and IDB spoke widely about how the Chixoy dam was “bringing development” to Guatemala.



The Chixoy dam wall, a ten minute boat ride down river from Los Encuentros.



Through the afternoon and into the night, Rio Negro community members spoke of all their loved ones killed, all that was lost (homes and lands they had lived on for centuries, animals, trees, community, and more) during the Rio Negro massacres.

One particular aspect of the Los Encuentros massacre is that the Army slaughtered dozens on the spot, kidnapped dozens more and took them away in helicopters, never to be seen again - until their remains were dug up from a mass grave inside the Guatemalan “CREOMPAZ” military base in 2012 by the FAFG.

I am here with Professor Catherine Nolin (UNBC geography), photo-journalist James Rodriguez and Erica Henderson (working with the FAFG – Guatemalan Foundation of Forensic Anthropology – that carries out the exhumations). Catherine and I are carrying out final interviews for a forthcoming book “Mining Impunity in the Aftermath of Guatemala’s Genocide: The Violence of Contemporary Predatory Mineral Exploitation”, (provisional title), to be published in late 2017, early 2018.

The book will look at how Canadian and U.S mining companies have caused human rights violations, repression and environmental degradation across Guatemala over the past 15 years, and done so with almost complete impunity and corruption. Furthermore, these harms, violations and repression can only be understood in the context of what was the intent and result of the U.S.- and western-backed repression and genocide of the 1970s and 1980s.



Ultimately, the horrific repression of the 1970s and 80s served to keep in place a political system, dominated by the military, that favours the economic interests of Guatemala's elites and global companies and investors (including the World Bank, IDB).

In the 1990s, while most Guatemalans were just beginning to overcome the trauma, fear and silence left by the massacres, disappearance and genocides, the U.S. and Canadian governments were extolling the virtues of mining and other industries as a way to "bring development" to Guatemala; Canadian and U.S. companies were scooping up mining and resource extraction "licenses" unbeknownst to the Guatemalan population, with no consultation with or consent from the majority indigenous population.

The mining related harms, repression and violations of the past 15 years have flowed predictably and logically from all this.



Late into the night and the next morning, the ceremony continued. Mario Chen (left) spoke. He lost most of his family in the Rio Negro massacres. After the previous massacres, he had been surviving with a group of Rio Negro survivor-refugees high in the mountains above Los Encuentros, hiding in a mountain crevice.

Mario told us that early on the morning of May 14, 1982, from high above Los Encuentros, “it sounded like Christmas day fireworks going off ... and we knew the Army had killed them all.”

The Chixoy dam story – of forced evictions, massacres, murders and disappearances of the Mayan Achi people of the Chixoy river basin – was a precursor to and is fundamentally similar to the story of mining harms, repression and violations, and the courageous community and environmental defense struggles of today.

More information

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