

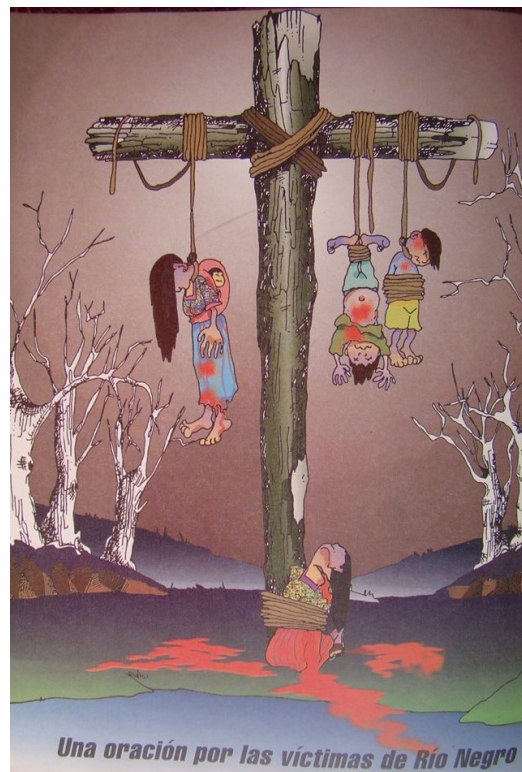
## May 14: 40th anniversary of Chixoy Dam/Rio Negro massacres in Guatemala

### Five massacres were carried out by the Guatemalan regime to make way for World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank's Chixoy hydro-electric dam project

By Grahame Russell, Rights Action

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/may-14-40th-anniversary-of-chixoy-damrio-negro-massacres-in-guatemala>

In 1981-1982, five large-scale massacres were carried out by the US-backed genocidal Guatemalan regimes against the Maya Achi village of Rio Negro, so as to make way for the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)'s Chixoy hydro-electric dam, an energy investment project that was financially profitable for both 'development' banks and that resulted in massive death and devastation to Rio Negro, and dozens of Maya villages along the Chixoy river.



"A prayer for victims of Rio Negro"

May 14 marks the date of one of the massacres. Now deep under the dam's flood basin waters, Los Encuentros was a meeting point down river from the remote village of Rio Negro, that had been nestled along the Chixoy river (also known as the Rio Negro) in central Guatemala for centuries, until the extraordinarily violent and illegal construction the World Bank and IDB Chixoy dam (1975-1985).



Depiction of Chixoy Dam/Rio Negro massacres, used in popular education work

## Savagery

In total, over 440 girls and boys, infants and elderly, men and women from Rio Negro were killed outright. It is hard to fathom the savagery of these slaughters. Villagers were killed by machete blows, strangulation and gun-shot; women were raped and beaten to death; small children and infants were beaten against rocks.

The massacres and destruction were carried out by the Guatemalan military and civil defense patrollers (PACs), and by security guards working for the Chixoy dam project.

After the final Rio Negro/Chixoy dam massacre in the village of Agua Fria, on September 14, 1982, some survivors perished due to hunger and disease, while hiding in caves and ravines in the surrounding mountains. Even after the

eradication of Rio Negro and most of its inhabitants, soldiers and PACs patrolled the Chixoy river basin area on foot, killing anyone they found surviving there.

### **World Bank/ IDB “relocation plan”**

The slaughter of Rio Negro villagers and eradication of the village served as the project’s “relocation” of the village, to make way for the filling of the dam flood basin. In total, over 30 Mayan communities were forcibly evicted in whole or part, up and down river from the dam wall. No community suffered more than Rio Negro.

In his book “Chixoy dam, displacement and development: Perspectives from Río Negro, Guatemala”, Nate Einbinder wrote: “There is no means by which to quantify what was lost in Río Negro” (<https://www.springer.com/la/book/9783319515106>).

Nate is correct. It is difficult to overstate the breadth and enormity of the World Bank and IDB’s criminality and violence, in direct partnership with the genocidal Guatemalan regimes of Generals Lucas Garcia and Rios Montt.

### **Inter-generational harms**

The impacts of the Chixoy dam/Rio Negro massacres and forced evictions continue today in multiple ways. Massacre and displacement survivors, their children and grand-children, scratch out lives today of subsistence, in conditions of chronic poverty. Many have been forced to flee home and country and try and make a life for themselves in Mexico or the US.

### **Inter-generational impunity**

It is also impossible to overstate the depth of corruption and impunity of the World Bank, IDB and successive US-backed regimes in Guatemala that were directly responsible for the Chixoy dam/Rio Negro massacres and forced displacements.

Almost four decades have passed, and still no justice has been done against the intellectual authors, beneficiaries and profiteers of this ‘international development’ investment project.

### **Survival / Truth / Justice and Reparations**

A reflection on the Chixoy dam/Rio Negro massacres 40 years later can best be understood in terms of the survival of the survivors and their on-going work and struggle to tell the truth and seek justice and reparations.

### **Survival**

Most Rio Negro survivors live today – with children and grandchildren born since the Chixoy dam crimes – in the former military-controlled concentration camp of Pacux where they were forced to live, and being “relocated” from Rio Negro. Some have returned to eke out a subsistence life, high on the dry mountainside above where the original community now lies under close to some 100 meters of Chixoy dam flood basin silt buildup and water.



Sebastian Iboy Osorio, survivor of and eye-witness (as a 16-year old boy) to the March 13, 1982 massacre wherein most of his family was killed, walks in Rio Negro, above the mud and silt that has filled in the Chixoy river basin since it was dammed in 1983, after the final massacre. The original community of Rio Negro lies below the mud.

Their on-going life conditions of poverty and inter-generational trauma are complicated and toxic, and are a direct result of the Chixoy dam massacres, displacements and harms. Yet survive they do, and continue to re-build lives for



their children and grand-children, and continue to tell the truth and demand justice and reparations.

One might say it is miraculous, but it is not. It is a testament to the Rio Negro survivors' (specifically) and the Mayan peoples' (generally) courage, dignity and spiritual strength rooted in their ancestors, lands and Mother Earth, gods and ceremonies.

### Truth

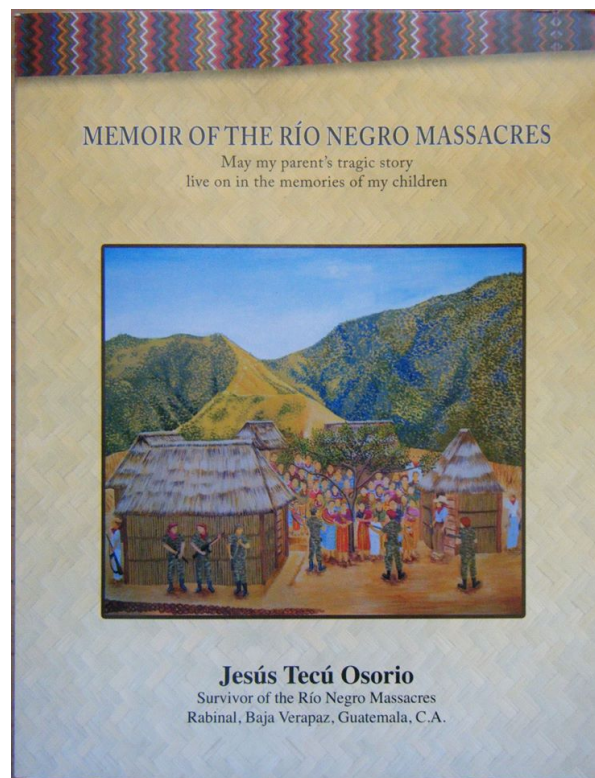
Since the first exhumation of victims of the Chixoy dam/Rio Negro massacres was carried out in 1993-94 by the EAFG (Guatemala Team of Forensic Anthropology), precursor to the FAFG (Guatemalan Foundation of Forensic Anthropology - <https://fafg.org/home/>), at the place known as 'Pak-o-shom' in the mountains above the original village of Rio Negro, the survivors have been truth-telling for any and all to hear.





Since this first Chixoy dam-linked mass grave exhumation, the survivors have been supporting other exhumations and pushing forward efforts to seek justice in Guatemala and internationally.

Massacre survivors and eye-witnesses - like Jesus Tecu Osorio and Carlos Chen Osorio - have written testimonial books. Documentary films have been made. Articles and reports written. Survivor-activists have travelled the world giving testimonials in conferences, and protesting at World Bank and IDB meetings.



## **Justice**

Despite widespread documentation about the Chixoy dam crimes, no justice has been achieved against any institution (IDB, World Bank) or government (Guatemala, US) for their roles as the intellectual and material authors of the Chixoy dam death and destruction.

## **National courts**

There is a partial exception to this last statement. Since 1994, the Rio Negro survivors have pressured Guatemala's corrupted and compromised legal system to put on trial, find guilty and send to jail nine former civil defense patrollers and military commissioners, mainly from the neighboring village of Xococ, that participated in the Rio Negro slaughters under the orders and control of the Guatemalan military.

This is an important achievement. In Guatemala's corrupted legal system, crimes against humanity trials are few, and convictions fewer. Yet the jailing of nine of the lowest ranking "material actors" of the Chixoy dam crimes also serves as proof of the impunity with which the "intellectual authors" of the crimes acted.

Not one single military officer in the chain of command, who ordered and carried out the Chixoy dam massacres, was captured, tried and sentenced.

Not one official or program officer from the World Bank and IDB was subjected to any investigation into the role of the banks in partnering with the genocidal regimes of Guatemala in planning and carrying out all aspects of the project – including the illegal land dispossession, massacres and forced displacements.

## **Inter-American Court of Human Rights**

Because only low-ranking "material actors" were found guilty of the Chixoy dam crimes, the Rio Negro survivors filed a petition with the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, arguing impunity and lack of access to justice.

After years of delays, manipulations by the Guatemalan government, and threats to Rio Negro survivors leading this justice struggle, on October 20, 2012, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights found the Guatemalan government responsible for the Rio Negro/ Chixoy dam massacres and ordered the government to:

- legally investigate the massacres;

- prosecute all material and intellectual perpetrators;
- continue to search for the disappeared;
- carry out exhumations and identify the victims;
- publicly acknowledge its responsibility;
- build basic infrastructure and services for Rio Negro survivors in Pacux;
- implement projects to rescue the culture of the Maya Achi people;
- provide medical and psychological treatment to the victims; and
- pay compensation to surviving families for material and non-material damages suffered.

While this ruling of the Inter-American Court is an important achievement of partial justice, the Court did not individualize responsibility - the ruling had no impact on the intellectual authors of the Chixoy dam crimes.

Moreover, the Inter-American Court refused to investigate the roles and responsibilities of the IDB and World Bank, reinforcing their corruption and impunity.

Only in 2019 did the government of Guatemala made the first partial payments to some of the surviving Rio Negro family members, while not complying with the other terms of the Court's sentence. Since then, the government has refused to pay out any further reparations funds or comply with any other requirements.

### **Chixoy Dam Reparations Campaign**

While not a formal legal process, this Chixoy Dam Reparations Campaign is a significant, yet unfinished achievement. After years of exhumations and other truth-telling work, Rio Negro survivors united in 2004 with the other villages forcibly displaced and harmed by the Chixoy dam violence and forced displacements to demand comprehensive reparations.

Clarification: the Inter-American Court sentence deals with the Rio Negro massacres directly linked to the Chixoy dam project; the Reparations Campaign deals with other losses and destructions caused by the project.

As with the Inter-American Court case, it was only after years of delays, manipulations and threats to the survivors leading this struggle, that on November 8, 2014, then president and former army general Otto Perez Molina (a



now in jail on corruption charges) apologized on behalf of the Guatemalan regime for the human rights violations and sufferings caused by the Chixoy dam project, and signed into law Decree #378-2014, “the Public Policy of Reparations for Communities Affected by the Construction of the Chixoy hydro-electric dam project”.

As of 2022, the government of Guatemala has made only partial payments of the total amount to be paid in family compensation and re-building projects for the communities harmed and destroyed by the project.

Again, the World Bank and IDB resisted all pressures to be included in the Reparations Campaign investigation. Impunity and corruption of the “international community” was again reinforced.

### **Courage, Dignity and Strength**

40 years later, only a small measure of reparations has been paid to some of the Chixoy dam victims. No justice has been done for the roles and responsibilities of the intellectual authors in the governments, World Bank and IDB that promoted, designed, implemented and profited financially from the project.

Pointing out the impunity and corruption of the intellectual authors and profiteers of the Chixoy dam project crimes highlights the enormity of this global human problem.

Across the planet today, governments, so-called ‘development’ banks, corporations and other investors push ahead with investment projects, violently displacing populations and destroying habitats, violating a wide range of individual and collective rights, and ravaging Mother Earth.

The Chixoy dam was one such project, perhaps more deadly, violent and destructive than most.

### **TESTIMONIO: Canadian Mining in the Aftermath of Genocides in Guatemala**

In our book TESTIMONIO, we include articles by Cyril Mychalejko and Nate Einbinder about the Chixoy Dam/Rio Negro massacres, making the direct connections between the creation of this massive source of hydro-electric energy

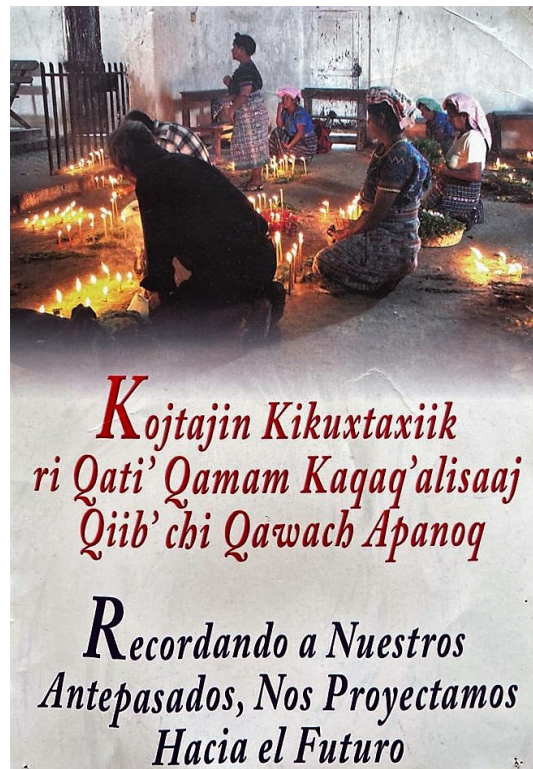
in the genocidal years of the 1970s and 80s, and the new wave of Canadian-led mining investment that began in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The World Bank was also – no surprise here - one of the most influential earlier investors in Goldcorp Inc’s open-pit, cyanide leaching mining operation – one of four large scale mines documented in TESTIMONIO.

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Pointing out the enormity of the impunity and corruption of the authors and profiteers of the Chixoy dam crimes takes nothing away, and indeed highlights the courage and dignity, strength and vision of the Rio Negro survivors.

Since I first met Carlos, Jesus, Antonia, Bruna, Teodora, Cristobal and other Rio Negro survivors in 1994, I have been in awe of their spiritual strength and dignity, of their commitment to re-building lives, families and community, and of their courageous, relentless struggle for truth and justice.



“Remembering our ancestors, we project to the future”

Since 1994, Rights Action has supported many truth, memory and justice processes, and community development and re-building projects initiated by the Rio Negro survivors. We are committed to continue doing so, ***and ... to continue demanding that the World Bank and IDB be held fully accountable someday, in some court, in some country or universe that actually believes in justice and accountability.***

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#### **More information**

- Carlos Chen, ADIVIMA (Association for Integral Development of Victims of Violence in the Verapaces, Maya Achi): [chenosorio.carlos@gmail.com](mailto:chenosorio.carlos@gmail.com);
- Jesus Tecu Osorio, Rabinal Legal Clinic (Bufete Popular): [bufete\\_rabinal@hotmail.com](mailto:bufete_rabinal@hotmail.com)

#### **Archives - Chixoy Dam/Rio Negro Massacres**

<https://rightsaction.org/chixoydam-archives>

#### **Chixoy Dam: No Reparations, No Justice, No Peace**

15 minute film (2013) by Lazar Konforti (<http://vimeo.com/50015125>).

#### **Other solidarity/NGO groups working with Rio Negro/ Chixoy dam survivor groups**

- NISGUA (Network in Solidarity with People of Guatemala): [www.nisgua.org](http://www.nisgua.org)
- GHRC (Guatemalan Human Rights Commission): [www.ghrc-usa.org](http://www.ghrc-usa.org)
- Breaking the Silence: [www.breakingthesilenceblog.com](http://www.breakingthesilenceblog.com)
- Qachuu Aloom 'Mother Earth' Association: <http://gardensedge.org/about/qachuu-aloom>

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#### **Testimonio: Canadian Mining in the Aftermath of Genocides in Guatemala**

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