**Guatemala: solidarity activists head for trouble**

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Abstract:

Human rights activists in Guatemala may find themselves unwittingly involved in old peasant feuds and angering those whom they have come to help. An increasing number of activists are being drawn to the country because of the continuing war between the military regime and guerrilla forces.

Full Text:

Why did you bring this gringo to take away our land?" the villagers challenged my driver. The question did not come as a surprise. For seven years, I've visited Guatemala to interview survivors of political violence. North Americans and Europeans have usually been welcome, but now that may be changing. As the last country in Central America with a war between an army-dominated state and a guerrilla movement, Guatemala is attracting thousands of human rights activists, who may alienate more Guatemalans than they dream possible.

It's not hard to see why the internacionalistas are coming. Despite three civilian presidents since 1986, Guatemala is still known as a death squad state run by one of the most abusive militaries in the hemisphere. The army makes speeches about human rights, but it continues to persecute the left, giving the guerrillas of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union (URNG) a rationale for fighting on from the hills. Even as "democratization" opens up room for foreign activists, Guatemala still offers a clear-cut struggle against injustice.

Many of the new European and North American activists practice "accompaniment." That is, they use their cachet as foreigners to protect Guatemalan dissidents from the security forces. But their license has limits, as suggested by the hysteria over foreigners allegedly kidnapping children to harvest their organs. So credible are these rumors, at least to many Guatemalans, that a mob beat a North American woman almost fatally. Until that point, fomenters of the hysteria had included left-wing journalists, who then decided that the mobs were being stirred up by the army to scare off foreign activists. Whoever is to blame, the organ-harvesting scare suggests how easily the politics of victimization can turn against foreigners.

Accompaniment will become more complicated because the army and the URNG guerrillas failed to keep their promise to sign a peace agreement by year's end. One obstacle is that the URNG never recovered from the army massacres of the early 1980s, leaving it without the popular support needed to extract concessions from the government. Hence the URNG's inclination to continue fighting ("by waging war, we fight for peace"), which keeps the above-ground left and its foreign allies in the shadow of a failed insurgency. In 1995 the limited opening of the past several years could come to an end. That is when what remains of a shrinking electorate (79 percent abstained from the last vote) is likely to return an evangelical dictator to the presidency. Everything about General Efrain Rios Montt - his scorched-earth campaigns in the early 1980s, law-and-order sermonizing, and relative popularity - horrifies the left. He will surely take a harder line than the current president, a former human rights ombudsman.

Accompaniment is also being complicated by underlying social conflicts which cannot be reduced to the dichotomies of solidarity thinking. Solidarity work with Guatemala has long meant stepping up international pressure on the army by blaming it for as much as possible. Unfortunately, that tends to give newly arrived activists the idea that every significant conflict can be reduced to the army versus the people, with "the people" represented by the political organizations with which they happen to work. The left has been all too happy to agree, by telling foreigners that hostile peasants are being manipulated by the army That peasants might have grievances against a failed revolutionary movement doesn't enter the picture.

Some of the confrontations involve land, an issue as old as the warring Mayan kingdoms whose descendants make up half the country's population. Because of the obvious challenges posed by the Guatemalan army, peasant competition over land has only recently begun to trouble human rights activists. But by failing to move beyond an "army versus the people" paradigm, activists are blundering into the middle of old peasant feuds in which they will only lose credibility. Such is the case in Chajul, a town in the Ixil Triangle of Quiche Department, which used to be known as a guerrilla bastion. The Ixil Mayas of Chajul now have divided feelings about "human rights," because it seems to mean foreigners supporting their enemies in land feuds.

The dispute over Los Cimientos, a deforested mountainside a day's walk from Chajul, comes out of the "two floors" of land ownership in Guatemala. As peasants clutch documents from their town hall, their adversaries prevail with a title from the national government. When native communities face a plantation owner with that kind of title, human rights groups do not hesitate to support the traditional claim against the interloper. In Chajul, unfortunately, the contenders are all Mayan Indians, they are all peasants, and they are clutching overlapping titles they are willing to die for.

K'iche' Mayas from the south began to settle in Los Cimientos around the turn of the century. What attracted them was a veritable promised land. Unlike their exhausted plots at higher altitudes, this was warm country, where they could cut into the forest to grow coffee, sugar cane, fruit and two crops of maize a year. There was just one problem: this was a hinterland belonging to the town of Chajul and its population of Ixil Mayas. The Chajules numbered fewer than 5,000 at the time (there are now up to 20,000), with an abundance of land they were willing to share with others, including K'iche's - but because of a collision between two systems of ownership, not with this particular group of K'iche's.

The older system dates to the colony under Spain, which prohibited outsiders from taking indigenous land. As a result, the Ixils of Chajul claim ownership of their town's entire hinterland because they are its native population, and they have an old title to prove it. If an outsider establishes himself through a document from the town hall, that's fine, because he has respected the local conception of land rights. But if an outsider tries to impose himself through a national title - one dating to the Liberal (or capitalist) Reform a century ago, which gave anyone the right to claim land in Mayan towns - he is asking for generations of resistance. Hence the long Ixil struggle against the "Tiger of the Ixcan," a plantation owner assassinated by the guerrillas in 1975. And the long Ixil struggle against the K'iche's of Los Cimientos.

The K'iche's are small holders like the Ixils, but they took advantage of the same laws as plantation owners to gain title to 1,350 hectares. The area was probably thinly settled when the K'iche's arrived, but they claimed a lot of it, including what became two Ixil villages. There were several killings, not to mention jailings, lawsuits and attempted evictions, as the K'iche's tried to mobilize the national police against the Ixils, without success.

Both sides reaped a bitter harvest in the early 1980s when accusations of land invasions turned into accusations of collaborating with guerrillas and soldiers. Like everyone else, the K'iche's had to abandon their village. It was destroyed, and they went to live with relatives in another area, where they were forced to join the army's antiguerrilla civil patrols.

In 1988 the K'iche's began visiting their land with the support of the army, to clear away brush for a garrison and a new village. Yet just before the K'iche's were to return, the Ixils showed the army their own municipal title. Choosing the path of least resistance, the army decided to alienate hundreds of K'iche's rather than thousands of Ixils; they allowed the Ixils to resettle Los Cimientos.

Over the next several years, the K'iche's exhausted their legal remedies. They even offered to donate land to the Ixils, but their overtures were rejected. In desperation the K'iche's stopped civil patrolling for the army and turned to the popular organizations of the left. Taking up their case was the Runujel Junam Council of Ethnic Communities (CERJ) and its founder, Amilcar Mendez, who have received the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award for opposing the army's civil patrols.

To present the situation in terms of human rights, the K'iche's minimized their longstanding feud with the Ixils. Instead, they set up a more familiar target for activists, blaming the whole problem on the army garrison. The Ixils, said the K'iche's, were just civil patrollers sent out by the army

The antimilitary. argument began to unravel in March when the army suddenly abandoned its fort. Significantly, the army now tells the K'iche's it has nothing against their return - probably because it realizes that the CERJ (which it has long persecuted) has walked into a trap. Simply by stepping aside, the army is showing thousands of Ixil peasants that they cannot trust the left and its foreign allies when it comes to land.

One hundred and thirty, K'iche's returned to Los Cimientos on August 9. Instead of reoccupying the village, they avoided bloodshed by camping on a nearby ridge. Unfortunately, that meant settling into coffee groves planted by another Ixil village, San Marcos Cumla, with whom the K'iche's have a similar land dispute. As soon as the Ixils of San Marcos recovered from their surprise, they became even more agitated than the Ixils of Los Cimientos.

"If the law doesn't give us an answer, we have another law!" fumed an Ixil elder, beside himself at the sight of K'iche's camped amid coffee bushes that he had just planted with the help of a sizable loan. "Here I had my coffee!" a K'iche' elder shook his fist. He was referring to the same spot.

Fifteen activists from Spain and other countries were camping with the K'iche's. They said they did not want to take sides, but that was hardly how they were perceived by the Ixils. While aware that there would be opposition from "Ixil civil patrollers," as CERJ put it, they had not understood that they would be occupying land cultivated by two Ixil communities. Having come to protect the K'iche's from army repression, they found themselves in the middle of an old peasant feud.

Even before the K'iche's returned to Los Cimientos, the Ixils of Chajul were at odds with another of the left's popular organizations over land. Before the war, the warm country north of town was a fertile Zion for hundreds of Ixil families. After many were forced to leave by the violence, they were replaced by waves of refugees fleeing from army offensives elsewhere. Long under siege by the army, this civilian population now calls itself the Communities of Population in Resistance of the Sierra (or CPRs), and it has become a major symbol for the Guatemalan left.

In April 1991 a UN official witnessed an aerial attack on a CPR village, forcing the army to adopt a less belligerent policy that allows members to visit their old villages. The reopening of trade has improved life in the CPRs, but it has also undermined their reason for existence. What used to keep the CPRs together was a well-founded fear of the army. Now that the army is less of a threat, what keeps the CPRs together is the land in which they find themselves, the best land still open to peasants in the entire Ixil Triangle. Until recently, CPR leaders claimed that their constituents would go home someday. But most members say they want to stay because their new land is far more fertile than their old. During the organization's Fifth Assembly at the end of July, it ratified a new position. As victims of army offensives and as a displaced population, the CPRs now claim the right to stay where they are.

As for the old Chajul owners (who are still displaced), the CPRs say they're welcome as long as they submit to CPR authority. But most of the old owners are not willing to do that, since the CPRs are not just peasant communities: they are also a popular organization of the left with political commitments many of the old Chajul owners reject. Because of their bitter experiences with both the guerrillas and the army, these Ixils don't want anything to do with the left. Instead, feeling victimized, the Chajules are now claiming far more land than they actually occupied before the war. "The land belongs to the Chajul race, it's not for people from other places" is heard on all sides. "They have to be gotten out with bullets," a Chajul youth told me. Even the children? I asked. "Yes, all of them, because otherwise they hide. . . . They're guerrillas because they're outside town and that's where the guerrillas are."

One aggravating factor is that the CPRs have refused to negotiate with the Chajul town hall. Notwithstanding their demand for dialogue with the national authorities, CPR leaders avow that Chajul's elected leaders are mere instruments of the army and therefore they refuse to discuss the land issue with them. Another irritant is the unconditional support that internationalists have given Chajul's adversaries. Since 1991 the CPRs have become a pilgrimage for foreign activists, especially those from Spain. While their presence has been an invaluable shield against army harassment, none seem to distinguish between supporting the CPRs against army offensives and supporting them in parochial conflicts with other peasants. The internationalists "don't want to talk with people in government villages because they think they've all `sold out.'" one observer told me. "If the people are outside the CPRs they are under control' [by the army] and there's no need to pay attention to them." Not surprisingly, more and more Chajules are reciprocating the disdain.

Internationalists are doing such important work - not just protecting the CPRs, but accompanying refugees home from Mexico and digging up clandestine cemeteries - that they should not endanger it by taking sides in peasant feuds. Avoiding such situations will require a break with the crudest forms of solidarity thinking, including the idea that local conflicts can be explained in terms of army manipulation, and that the wishes of "the people" can be deduced from the nearest popular organization. These are not assumptions that most Guatemalans share, and they can easily provoke reactions. They derive from the popular organizations themselves, whose campaigns for human rights have acquired an international constituency. But "popular" refers to the political aspirations of these groups, not their popularity, which in a town like Chajul may be zero.

Focusing exclusively on the army's history of repression, as many foreign activists do, has the unfortunate effect of overlooking how the guerrillas and their allies can alienate peasants. Unlike foreign activists, the Mayas of this area have very divided feelings about the guerrillas and the left. Certainly fear of the army shapes what they do, but so does bitterness over the high-handed guerrilla agenda that brought the army down on their heads in the early 1980s.

In Chajul, the proper role for outsiders is mediation. The Mayan adversaries have to recognize that their enemies also have rights, and one place to start is their mutual hypocrisy. The Ixils of Chajul claim their rights as a population displaced by the CPRs. Yet the refuse to recognize the rights of the Los Cimientos K'iche's as displaced people. The popular movement, as represented by the CPRs of the Sierra and by CERJ, is no more consistent. At Los Cimientos the popular movement supports the right of the displaced K'iche's to return home. Yet in the CPRs it opposes the displaced Ixils of Chajul, because their land is occupied by its own members.

Were the CPRs to live up to their oft-declared devotion to human rights by recognizing the rights of the displaced Chajules, it would pressure the latter to recognize the rights of the K'iche's. To date, unfortunately, the two popular organizations seem all too willing to alienate peasants outside their ranks. Grabbing land for your own clientele is what counts, not the rhetoric of Mayan unity. Ironically, a Mayan coalition which includes both CERJ and the CPRs, the Majawil Q'ij, is calling for the return of Indian land confiscated by the Liberal Revolution since 1871. That would include giving everything back to the Chajules.

There is a cruel irony . The revolutionary movement used to publicize the Ixils as paragons of resistance. But now the Ixils are out of favor, at least as an ethnic group. After paving an unusually high death toll, the majority of Ixils aligned themselves with the army, which was regarded as their only salvation from a failed revolutionary strategy. Now the left considers most Ixils to be dominated, therefore they can be ignored, and government intervention can be solicited against their municipal land claims in the name of the new icon, the heroic CPRs.

The lesson is that Mayan peasants who suit the needs of the popular organizations and their foreign supporters mall be romanticized. Those who don't mill be deprecated. It should come as no surprise if some of the latter lash back. If Ixil and K'iche' peasants start macheting each other again, as they did before the war, it will now be in the name of human rights, and the foreigners on the scene are likely to take more than their share of the blame.

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