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## COPPER COUNTRY GUATEMALA ACCOMPANIMENT PROJECT

A Link between Guatemala and the Copper Country



# CCGAP Newsletter



October 2003 Number 27

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## CELEBRATING CONNECTIONS

### HALE'S FINAL LETTER FROM FRONTERIZO

Men on horseback racing to yank the head off a live duck: strange ceremony. Effigies of the devil going up in flames to welcome the start of the Christmas

season: strange, interesting ceremony. Life-size dummies carried door-to-door on Good Friday by kids demanding bread and candy: cute ceremony, still sort of strange. I've seen some unique celebrations in Guatemala, so I was ready for anything as my village geared up to mark its eighth anniversary.

May 10th is, of course, a big deal when you live in a place called Fronterizo 10

de Mayo. The village was named for the date of its founding in 1995 by families of resettling refugees. Eight years later, with dark memories of war, flight and exile slowly fading under happier memories of babies,

harvests and community, the village decided to throw a weekend-long celebration.

The newly crowned Queen of the Fair threw the party open with a call to "celebrate the eighth anniversary of this beautiful place where you hear the singing of the birds and the roaring of the tigers." I think the line about the tigers was added for dramatic flair, unless I just haven't heard them over the past six months. But there was roaring of a sort, during the commemorative soccer tournament. Eight teams had come from neighboring communities to vie for a

\$100 prize. The home team finished a respectable second to the cheers of kids perched on tree branches above the field. And then the music started.

*continued on page 2.....*

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## GENOCIDE CASE WITNESSES AT RISK

### *New accompaniment challenge*

#### **Imagine:**

Imagine that you live in a small isolated rural community—you know everyone and everyone knows you. You don't leave town too often, because to reach a paved road you must walk long distances.

Now imagine that one day you hear the whir of helicopter blades and feel the wind whip above you as a helicopter hovers only meters from the top of your house. Imagine a few hundred

government soldiers herd you, your children, your spouse, your grandparents, and everyone else together for some "important announcements." Imagine they divide the men from the women, the children from the adults. Imagine mass rapes of the young women, brutal slaying of the men, and having to watch babies' heads bashed against rocks.

Many Guatemalans do not have to imagine this gruesome scenario. They

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### ***Meet the Accompaniers!***

***Hale Sargent***

***&***

***Vernon Chow***

***will be at the***

***First United Methodist  
Church in Hancock  
November 16th***

***Potluck at 5:30 PM,  
Program at 6:30 PM***

## CELEBRATIONS

*continued from page 1*

Beauty queens and soccer tournaments are nice, but the real business at village celebrations is the dancing. A live band came down the river from Mexico in canoes stuffed with equipment and electric generators. They set up on a makeshift stage in the center of town. Once night fell, boys from all around the region lined up in their nicest cowboy hats and bluejeans. Girls strolled arm-in-arm admiring the decorations strung under an open sky. And only after the band played to an empty dance floor for about an hour did the ritual start.

First the married couples ventured out, kicking up the dirt to their favorite Mexican love songs. Then the boys took their cue and rushed the girls, dancing away one of their few chances a year to mix, flirt, and scout out a future partner. Messages were sent back and forth through dedications read by the band. One apparently-spurned young man wrote, "I request 'The Traitor' and dedicate it to all the girls of Fronterizo." His night's failures aside, Fronterizo's anniversary party was one of the nicest ceremonies I've witnessed in Guatemala -- people using sports, music and dancing to connect with their past and connect with each other.

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*Strengthening connections has been the goal of our accompaniment project...*

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Connections. We all feel them, whether they're to a land we were forced to flee, a song we request for a loved one, the singing of the birds, or the roaring of the tigers. Strengthening connections has been the goal of our accompaniment project in Guatemala. Your and my connection to the people of Fronterizo gives them an extra layer of security in a dangerous, unpredictable country.

And we benefit from the connection as well. Who impoverishes the rural farmers when free trade agreements allow cheaper American products to flood local markets? Who is at the muzzle-end of military aid given to corrupt regimes? Who could we be helping by purchasing fair-trade products that guarantee a just salary for the producers? Now through our links with the people of Guatemala we have human faces to apply to such complex global issues. We have motivation to hold our elected officials -- AND OURSELVES -- accountable for decisions that reverberate in far-off places.

And the connection means we, too, can celebrate when the dancing continues for years to come.



A popular song I've been taught in Fronterizo goes, "Today I find myself very, very far/ From the land where I was born/ From my parents and my siblings/ And the neighborhood that watched me grow up/ The nostalgia shatters my soul/ And I'd like to return to see them."

The song is about an immigrant in the U.S. thinking of home, but it obviously works both ways. I've been humming it a lot as I get ready to pack up and come home in two weeks.

Once again, thank you all for the interest you've taken in the safety of the people of Guatemala. Unfortunately, in my time here I was unable to report that Guatemala's barriers to justice have crumbled; I can't tell you that threats against human rights defenders are on the decline; we didn't see power structures reformed as promised in the 1996 Peace Accords.

So the need for non-violent international pressure on the leaders of Guatemala has not diminished.



### WANT TO DO SOMETHING?

Did you know that coffee prices are approaching their lowest levels ever? The world's 25 million small-scale coffee farmers have noticed. They now receive less for their coffee beans than it costs them to produce. Meanwhile, are coffee prices dropping considerably at the supermarket? According to the International Coffee Organization, "in the last decade, the major coffee companies' revenues have doubled."

Products that are certified FAIR-TRADE guarantee the producers receive a fair cut of the profit. Consumer pressure has already put fair trade coffee on the shelves of Trader Joe's, Safeway, Borders Books and Music, Albertson's, Ralph's, Shaws Supermarkets, Whole Foods, Ten Thousand Villages, and Starbucks.

Please support the growth of the fair trade movement! Ask your local store why they don't carry fair trade coffee, or thank them if they do. Tell them you have some friends in Guatemala who really appreciate it.

More details and a list of where to buy can be found at: [www.globalexchange.org/economy/coffee/](http://www.globalexchange.org/economy/coffee/)

# Bizarre Politics: *Guatemala's elections*

Guatemalans will hold Presidential elections on November 9th, 2003. In a bizarre twist of politics, the leader of the currently ruling FRG (Guatemalan Republican Front) party is a presidential candidate. Former military dictator General Efraín Ríos Montt is widely recognized as the mastermind of the scorched earth policy during his regime in 1982-83, when over 19,000 people suffered war-related deaths or disappearances. In two separate cases, Nobel Peace Prize recipient Rigoberta Menchú Tum and an organization of massacre survivors, the Association for Justice and Reconciliation, have brought legal cases against Ríos Montt, charging him with genocide and crimes against humanity. [See related story, **Genocide Case Witnesses...** page 1.]

Ríos Montt took power in 1982 through a coup d'état. Guatemala's constitution bans former coup participants from running for President. Since 1990 a total of 55 judges have upheld this constitutional rule in spite of Ríos Montt's claim that the rule should not apply to him since he took power before the constitution was written. But in a highly controversial July 14th ruling by the Constitutional Court he has

been allowed to register as a candidate. The ruling is widely believed to have been manipulated by the FRG.

After the ruling was announced, several appeals were filed by other political parties and protests were organized by civil society. In response, Ríos Montt declared that he cannot control the actions of FRG's affiliates, insinuating that there would be violence. Several days later, on the 24th and 25th of July, riots financed and coordinated by FRG officials rocked Guatemala City. Three thousand rural *campesinos* and state workers were forced or paid to travel to the capital. Once in the capital, masked people with radios, some identified as members of the FRG, the government, or the army, handed out sticks, clubs, gasoline, and tires to besiege the Supreme Electoral Court, the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court, *el Centro Empresarial*, the offices of the daily newspaper *El Periódico*, the house of a Constitutional Court magistrate who had voted against the registration of Ríos Montt, and the house of former president Alvaro Arzú.

During the riots, journalists were one of the main targets for attack, resulting in many injuries and the

death of one journalist.

The presidential hopeful has his share of outspoken critics, though, particularly among human rights advocates. In June, an angry crowd in Rabinal pelted Ríos Montt with stones and bottles, incensed that he dared show up in town for a campaign rally on the eve of the reburial and commemoration service for the exhumed remains of massacre victims.

The U.S. government, which supported Ríos Montt during his regime, has stated that it would be difficult to maintain a normal relationship with the ex-ruler due to his human rights record. Nor is Ríos Montt a friend to big business, whose leaders prefer candidates who would attract rather than upset foreign investors.

Some human rights activists are anxious to see Ríos Montt run—and lose. A defeat at the polls would likely deal a blow to his power and influence. However, even if he loses resoundingly on voting day, the CC ruling in favor of Ríos Montt indicates pro-military leanings among members of the highest court and does not bode well for legal efforts that seek justice for human rights violators.

*The above article was compiled from the Report on Guatemala, Summer 2003 by Alexandra Durbin, and from various sources by other NISGUA staff.*

## CCGAP's New Accompanier

Vernon Chow comes to us from the Village Acres Farm in Pennsylvania, where he has worked for the past two years, planting, maintaining and harvesting organic crops for a community-supported agriculture program. He plans to start his one-year term as an accompanier in January 2004.

"An international accompanier serves as a physical reminder that people outside Guatemala care," writes Vernon. "By relaying information to people within and outside Guatemala, one can reduce the sense that human rights abuses occur with impunity."

As Vernon will be spending his time with the families of witnesses participating in the genocide trials (see page 1), he says he hopes to "contribute to ensuring that human rights trials take place, and that crimes from the war years are documented and at least partially redressed."

# Current Affairs in Fronterizo

**COMMUNITY KITCHEN** Last December, the women active in the day care center attended a three-day workshop given by the organization RIGHTS ACTION in Ixtahuacan Chiquito, the village across the river. There, they noticed that the women of Ixtahuacan Chiquito had a community kitchen to make meals for the group and to make the morning snacks for the school children. The Fronterizo ladies wanted a kitchen too.

Through a very generous donation from the First United Methodist Church in Hancock, they are currently building that kitchen and we look forward to seeing the finished structure when we visit next spring. According to the plan, it will have two fire platforms, one for the use of the day care center and the other for the use of the grade school children.

**LATRINES** CCGAP also gave funding for building three double-seated, vented, dry-composting latrines for the use

of the school. A committee has been appointed to see that the latrines are used properly and kept clean and free of pests.

**HEALTH** When Hale made his last report in May, there was a lot of sickness in Fronterizo, many children with high fevers, and adults with *paludismo* (malaria). The community has appointed another health promoter to help out in the clinic so now two people can rotate the duties. There have been several women receiving training as *comadronas* (midwives), although they seem to be getting no support from the authorities of the village.

**LAND ISSUES** The land issue remains unresolved.

Many men from Fronterizo are in the US as undocumented workers. They are able to send home money to support their families, but it also means that there are fewer people in the community willing to take responsibility for problems such as working towards ownership of the land.

*Work starts on the new latrines.*

*Photo by Hale Srgent*

## Thank you, thank you, thank you, thanks.....

Thank you so much to the following people who gave financial donations since last newsletter:

*Kate Alvord  
Barbara Bell  
Gordon Borsvold  
Rebecca Brown  
Elly Bunzendahl  
Larry Carroll & Mary Haller  
Mel Driller  
Beth & Kate Flynn  
Jo Foley  
Greg Gerstner  
Kerry Harris  
Merle Kindred  
Leonard & Velma Kingsley  
Ken & Susie Kraft  
Laila Leskela  
Irene Pawlowski, in memory of her husband Donald  
John Sargent  
Mark Weber  
Kay Yanisch*

Thanks also to these friends who helped with our fund-raising concert last May: *Viki Weglarz, Rich Featherly and Debbie Hart and their children, Suzanne VanDam, Beth Flynn, also to Gordon Borsvold, Dennis Sotala, Barbara and Norm Kendall and all the members of Finn Street band.*

Special thanks go to the Mission Committee of the First United Methodist Church in Hancock for their generous financial donations and willingness to provide a venue for peace-making efforts of many kinds.

The Copper Country Guatemala Accompaniment Project (CCGAP) is a group of organizations and individuals who form a sponsoring community for the Guatemalan village of Fronterizo 10 de Mayo, a community established on the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 1995 by a group of refugees who returned to Guatemala after 12-15 years in refugee camps in Mexico. CCGAP is committed to maintaining a long-term relationship with Fronterizo and to financially support accompaniers to serve as human rights observers in accordance with the agreements signed by the Guatemalan government in 1992. CCGAP endeavors to strengthen the ties between our communities and express our solidarity with Fronterizo by developing individual relationships and by giving financial support to small projects planned by the Guatemala community. We offer educational talks on Guatemala to groups here in the Copper Country along with the opportunity to become involved in this community-to-community relationship with the Mayan indigenous people of Guatemala.

The Guatemala Accompaniment Project (GAP) is a branch of the national organization, NISGUA (Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala). All donations to CCGAP are used to support accompaniers in Guatemala and small community projects as requested by the members of Fronterizo. Funds are also used to disseminate information among people of the Copper Country community.

### CCGAP Board members:

*Rich Featherly, president  
Floyd Henderson, treasurer  
Terry Kinzel, secretary  
Suzanne VanDam  
Viki Weglarz  
Sarah Green  
Linda Rulison  
Stephen Pluhacek  
Beth Flynn*

Dear CCGAP Supporter,

With your generous donations, CCGAP has sponsored an accompanier for six months out of each of the past seven years at a cost of over \$3000 per six months. Next year, our accompanier plans to serve for an entire year. That means we will need nearly \$7000 just to support the accompaniment work. In addition, we continue to sponsor projects in Fronterizo such as the water pots, at a cost of over \$2000, and the latrines costing around \$1200.

CCGAP has no paid staff. Although a portion of our funds is used in publishing this newsletter and other fund-raising efforts, 90% of your donation goes toward human rights work and material aid for Guatemala. Please give generously.

## Contribution to CCGAP

Here is my tax-deductible contribution to the Copper Country Guatemala Accompaniment Project, a 502(c)(3) organization.

\$15    \$25    \$50    \$100    \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip \_\_\_\_\_

CCGAP

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## Witnesses at Risk from page 1

lived through it and they relive it in their nightmares. During the early 1980s the Guatemalan government—funded, trained, and supported by the US government—massacred more civilians than were killed in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Argentina, and Chile put together. **The ethnic cleansing that took place in Guatemala exceeded that of Bosnia, and yet there has been no sustained international outcry for justice in this case.**

From 1981 to 1983, under the leadership of Generals Lucas Garcia and Rios Montt, (see story *Guatemala's Elections* on page 3) Guatemala was subjected to the most brutal two years of its 36-year civil war. In 1999, the UN-sponsored Historical Clarification Commission declared this extreme violence against indigenous communities as constituting a state policy of genocide.

### Why does it matter now?

It matters because, against all odds, survivors of the massacres have brought criminal cases against the intellectual authors of that crime—men who today continue to rule Congress and control the military. In 2000, hundreds of massacre survivors from twenty predominantly Mayan communities, communities similar to Fronterizo, joined together to form the Asso-

ciation for Justice and Reconciliation (AJR). Members have initiated landmark human rights cases against Lucas Garcia and current head of Congress and Presidential candidate Rios Montt, charging them with genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes.

This is the first time that a group of genocide survivors has sought to bring such high level military officials to justice within the Guatemalan court system, and these cases will establish a precedent for genocide survivors seeking justice in Guatemala and beyond.

**Over the past year, there has been a sharp increase in the number of acts of intimidation and death threats against individuals involved in the genocide cases.** Just this month, Fernando Lopez, director of the legal team for the genocide cases at the Center for Human Rights Legal Action (CALDH) received a written death threat which was left in his car while he was in a pharmacy in Guatemala City.

The witnesses who live in isolated rural communities also feel at risk. For the past three years they have been getting accompaniment; they feel that having the physical presence of an international observer gives them a level of support and security.

## Here is where CCGAP comes

**in.** At the last CCGAP board meeting, members decided that we could put our support towards accompanying a genocide case witness for at least a year, recognizing that right now their risk is greater than the risk of members of our sister community of Fronterizo. CCGAP plans to continue our relationship with Fronterizo. Representatives of CCGAP will be visiting the village in early spring of 2004 (if you would like to join a delegation, please get in touch), and we receive phone calls from the mayor of Fronterizo reporting on any new developments. (Phones are a fairly new development, there now being several satellite phones in Fronterizo, mainly for the convenience of the families whose breadwinners have immigrated to the US.) Also we will continue to respond to requests for material aid as we are able.

CCGAP's primary mission continues to be to provide accompaniment where it is needed and we hope that by changing our focus in this coming year, we may help to further the cause of human rights work in Guatemala.



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## School of Americas Watch

The School of the Americas (SOA), in 2001 renamed the "Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation," is a combat training school for Latin American soldiers; it is currently located at Fort Benning, Georgia.

Initially established in Panama in 1946, it was kicked out of that country in 1984 under the terms of the Panama Canal Treaty. Former Panamanian President, Jorge Illueca, stated that the School of the Americas was the "biggest base for destabilization in Latin America." The SOA, frequently dubbed the "School of Assassins," has left a trail of blood and suffering in every country where its graduates have returned.

Over its 56 years, the SOA has trained over 60,000 Latin American soldiers in counterinsurgency techniques, sniper training, commando and psychological warfare, military intelligence and interrogation tactics. These graduates have consistently used their skills to wage a war against their own people. Among those targeted by SOA graduates are educators, union organizers, religious workers, student leaders, and others who work for the rights of the poor. Hundreds of thousands of Latin Americans have been tortured, raped, assassinated, "disappeared," massacred, and forced into refuge by those trained at the School of Assassins.

The annual protest demonstration in Ft. Benning will take place on November 14-16 this year. Go to [www.soaw.org](http://www.soaw.org) to learn more.