

# UPSTREAM JOURNAL

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## “BLACK THURSDAY”

### GUATEMALA’S FORMER DICTATOR BRINGS FEAR AND VIOLENCE TO PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

By Ernie Schibli

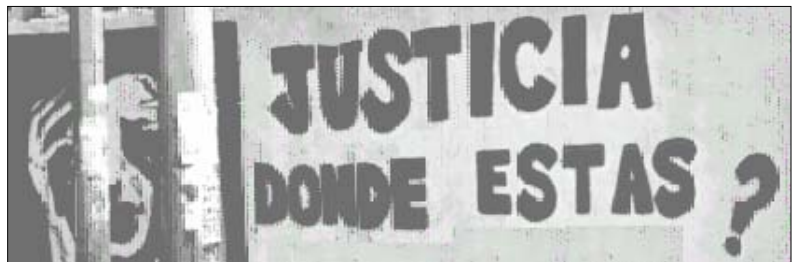
**O**n Thursday afternoon, July 24<sup>th</sup>, I was downloading the last email messages before making my final preparations for our three-week long trip to El Salvador and Guatemala. In twelve hours time, the five of us from St. Edward’s – St. John’s church community would be at the airport. As usual, the vast majority of the messages on the screen in front of me were spam. Nothing very interesting. Wait a minute! There’s a message from the GAM, a Guatemalan human rights organization, and another from ACOGUATE, and still others. “Rioting and Violence in Guatemala” screams yet another.

That was my introduction to “Black Thursday”. On that day, a carefully planned and organized demonstration took over Guatemala City. Up to 60,000 people, waving banners in support of General

Efraín Ríos Montt’s desire to run for president of Guatemala, surrounded the Supreme Court, office buildings, foreign embassies, and other government buildings, virtually shutting down the city. They attacked members of the press (leading to the death of one), issued death threats against human rights

wants to lead in the November elections.) It was only on Friday morning, after the general told the crowd surrounding the Supreme Court to leave, that they filed back on to the buses and returned to the countryside, leaving a country shaken and stunned.

We arrived by bus from El Salvador five



organizations, condemned the business community, and set fire to tires surrounding a high rise. For close to 24 hours they held the city captive.

Throughout it all, the police and the army were conspicuous by their absence. They had abandoned the city to the mob. Clearly they took their orders from the FRG (the ruling party which Ríos Montt

days later. With the exception of some graffiti on the walls there were few external signs to indicate what had taken place. Yet the fear was palpable. The taxi driver tells us that we are crazy to stay at a hotel in zone 1, “too dangerous!” Rumors of an impending coup that afternoon abound. Indeed, the usually crowded 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue is

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Empowerment video-conference

On July 23 the Social Justice Committee took part in a video-conference between Concordia University and the World Bank, focusing on "empowerment" and how the Bank is moving to empower people affected by its programs. The event was initiated by Derek MacCuish, the economic research and policy advisor at the SJC, as part of a course on global governance he teaches at Concordia. The goal was to gather information and create a dialog with policy makers.

The World Bank representatives were Deepa Narayan, Senior Adviser in the Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Network of the World Bank and the leader of the development of its empowerment framework, and Ruth Alsop, a Senior Social Scientist and PRMPR Task Team Leader for Empowerment. Ms. Alsop jointly manages the Empowerment Community of Practice.

Six university students participated, three from Concordia — Emilie Blais, Marieve Chabot and Annik LeBlanc. Other participants were SJC interns Naa Ashorkor Tetteh, a Grinnell College (US) junior; Sophie Toupin, an Aalborg University (Denmark) student; and Jessica Cohen, from the Institute of Political Science of Paris (France).

All the students participating in this conference put in weeks of preparation to familiarize themselves with the World Bank's work and, in particular, its empowerment framework.

After reading and studying the empowerment project and, each student chose an area she was most interested in and framed a few questions that were not answered to on the website, in the empowerment sourcebook or in the three volumes of the *Voices of the Poor* study. Each question was an informed question; students were ready to have follow up questions according to the answers they were given.

The discussion matched up various themes such as democracy, gender, culture, private sector financing and measurement of empowerment. The SJC will soon provide a more complete report of this conference.

**The Social Justice Committee has been working to raise public awareness of, and foster action on, international development and social justice issues since 1975. We work in solidarity with people in a number of Third World countries, and with Canadian and international organizations, in the search for a more just and sustainable socio-economic system. We try to raise the awareness of the root causes of hunger, poverty and repression in the world, and how they are related to us. Books, periodicals and audio-visuals are loaned free of charge through our documentation centre. Resource people are available to give presentations to school, church and community groups.**

**Views expressed in the *Upstream Journal* are the writers' own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Social Justice Committee. We welcome the submission of illustrations and articles on different aspects of international development and human rights (contact editor Derek MacCuish). Supporters of the Social Justice Committee receive *The Upstream Journal* by mail. This newsletter is published five times a year, at irregular intervals between September and June.**

**The Social Justice Committee depends on financial support from its members and the general public. It is a registered charitable organization; donations are tax deductible.**

**We count on volunteer participation. Call to find out how you can get involved in the short or longer term.**

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I am unable to make a contribution at this time, but I would like to receive the *Upstream Journal*.

(Continued from page 1)

almost deserted by mid-afternoon. Our phone calls to human rights organizations remain unanswered. Yet, nothing happens.

I have been visiting Guatemalan human rights organizations for more than twenty years. Never, even during the height of the war, did I experience the fear and discouragement that now pervades them. Black Thursday was not an ordinary demonstration. Guatemala has experienced many of those, often much bigger. Just a few days earlier, those opposing Ríos Montt's candidacy, publicly made their opposition known – without incident. On Black Thursday, it was the absence of the police that said it all. The general had made it clear who calls the shots in this country.

### Recent history

Let's backtrack a bit. Ríos Montt was a military dictator back during the darkest years of Guatemala's war of oppression. It was under him that the Guatemalan armed forces committed most of their atrocities and murders – hundreds of villages destroyed, thousands murdered and hundreds of thousands forced into exile. "Social cleansing", he said just recently. After a few years he fell from power but never lost the desire to become president. On two previous occasions he asked to be recognized as a legitimate candidate for election. On each, the Constitutional Court ruled that the country's constitution prohibited ex-dictators from running.

Very well! The constitution did not prevent him from becoming president of the General Assembly, which he did in 2000. Nor did it prevent him from getting his chosen elected president at the same time. Yet, despite all the power he now has, he is determined to become president.

So, this year he went back to the Constitutional Court and this time received the answer he wanted. By a vote of 4-3 he was ruled eligible to run. Naturally, there was an instant response by numerous sectors of society. The news media, human rights organizations and civil society at large led the protest. Court challenges were initiated. It was at this point that his party, the FRG, organized Black Thursday.

There is no doubt it was organized. The hundreds of buses used to transport protestors had to be paid for; free food was provided to the protestors; someone had the foresight to set up portable potties; even trucks delivered the tires and gasoline for burning. FRG leaders, though wearing hoods and masks, were identified

in the forefront of the demonstrations.

Though Ríos Montt denied any connection "it was a

spontaneous demonstration of support," Minugua (United Nations Mission to Guatemala) clearly laid responsibility for the demonstration at the feet of the FRG.

Those demonstrating were a mixture of FRG supporters, members of youth gangs (one such gang has been linked to Ríos Montt) and *campesinos* from the countryside. We were told by very reliable sources that many of the latter were bribed or threatened into taking part, "if we don't go, we will lose our jobs."

### The Aftermath

The human rights organizations were devastated. Within days, Ríos Montt was inscribed as presidential candidate for the FRG (there are still some appeals

outstanding), and threats against the organizations were intensified and acted upon. Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Rigoberta Menchú was personally attacked. Armed men kidnapped, beat and robbed one of her relatives working with the Fundación Rigoberta Menchú. Threats arrived at many offices by both mail and telephone. Unidentified men began surveillance of their offices. Another opposition candidate was assassinated.

A couple of days before we left (Aug. 12), a newspaper poll claimed that Ríos Montt and the FRG were in eighth place (22 parties running) with but 3.8% of the votes. No one, especially in the human rights community, believes it. The FRG has the determination and the funds to pull

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***Its support lies in the military that has stashed away millions of dollars through drug trafficking and corruption. It has demonstrated a ruthlessness that knows no bounds.***

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it off. Its support lies in the military that has stashed away millions of dollars through drug trafficking and corruption. It has demonstrated a ruthlessness that knows no bounds. Moreover, the opposition is very weak, divided, and with little to offer.

If the cloud has a silver lining it would have to be that civil society from the political left to the political right including the business community, has come together to oppose the FRG. Whether they will successfully forge a united opposition remains to be seen but an attempt is under way. They know that the FRG will do everything in its power to steal the election and that it has a lot going for it. They also realize that they are terribly isolated. International solidarity has weakened greatly since the signing of the peace accords.

Minugua's mandate is coming to an end and it will be terminated. Foreign governments seem much more interested in free trade pacts than human rights and democracy.

### International Solidarity

Everyone in the human rights community whom we spoke with called for increased international solidarity. They especially are seeking observers for the elections. However, they are required now not just a few weeks prior to the voting. The fraud and intimidation is taking place now as I write. As the only ways the FRG can win are through intimidation and fraud, the human rights organizations ask that other governments make it clear that they will not tolerate an unfair election.

All this must be seen against a backdrop of poverty, hunger and unemployment. Both the PAN and the FRG (the two most recent governing parties) have done very little to overcome the huge economic disparities that have relegated so many Guatemalans to lives of perpetual misery.

Solidarity with Guatemala has a long history of support in Canada. Even now there are groups across the country doing a multiple of things from physical accompaniment to urgent actions to education to lobbying. As I write this article I hear again one person with a long experience in human rights saying, "it is worse than during the war," another, "the past two weeks have been just terrible," and yet another bursting into tears over what

**Meeting: Central America—Mexico committee, 6pm Sept 8**  
**Much has happened in the region recently and most has not been good. We'll be meeting to plan activities. New members are very welcome. All that is required is an interest in the region and a willingness to get involved.**  
**Info: Call Gloria or Ernie at the SJC office, 933-6797.**



The hills near San Marcos, Guatemala

### SJC strengthens its network of connections in Central America

The SJC coordinator of Central America programs met in Honduras this summer with other NGO representatives from Central America, Mexico and other countries. She then went to Nicaragua to meet with other organizations and to talk with community leaders where human rights are being violated. The SJC representative spent two weeks in each country.

In Honduras, there were two conferences in the town of La Esperanza, Intibucá, one on biodiversity and the other on the problems of large dams. Hundreds of people were present, and the themes treated went beyond what the titles of the conferences would indicate. They included workshops on privatization of social services and on the international financial system, briefly looking at free trade agreements, Plan Puebla-Panama and the World Trade Organization. This was from July 17 to July 20.

From July 22 to 24, we were present at a Mesoamerican meeting, the Fourth forum against the Plan Puebla-Panama, in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Again, the themes at this Forum were not limited to the Plan Puebla-Panama, everybody was also very interested in exchanging information on free trade agreements, the World Trade Organization and the international financial institutions, specially the Inter-American Development Bank and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration. Before and after the conferences, there were private meetings with Honduran NGOs. In addition, we participated in an international delegation to an area of Honduras where human rights violations seemed to be more acute at that time.

In Nicaragua, there were meetings with NGO people working against privatization of social services and visited an area of the Caribbean coast where a commercial enterprise, partially owned by a Canadian, is planning to build a pipeline against the wishes of the community.

- Gloria Pereira-Papenburg, coordinator of SJC Central America programs

# Journey to Green Mountain: Repression and Resistance in Montaña Verde

by Sandra Cuffe

**A**fter twenty minutes of feeling like I was in some modern art sculptor's latest work, "extreme discomfort," I wriggled my way free of the mass of human sardines, clambered over the back door of the cattle truck, and found myself a spot on the back ledge. Hanging on took no effort since we were chugging along at a snail's pace, leaving me free to enjoy the gorgeous mountainous landscape of western Honduras.

Preparations in La Esperanza (Hope) for my two-week trip to Montaña Verde (Green Mountain), where I would be staying as a human rights accompanier, were filled with horror stories about the steep and muddy three-hour hike from Monte Verde into the first community. Apparently, making it there without repeatedly slipping down the muddy mountain paths was going to be a challenge. We had a beautiful sunny day, however, as I bounded up the side of a mountain with my heavy backpack, feeling rather enthusiastic about everything. When the storm hit a little while later, I threw on my poncho and trusty rubber boots and trudged down to the first community, excited to have finally made it to the place about which I had been hearing so much.

## Montaña Verde

Although Montaña Verde has only fairly recently begun to receive some international attention, repression and hostilities against the indigenous Lenca resident population have been

carrying on for decades. Set in a pristine mountain environment of young liquidambar and pine forest, rich cultivable land, and clear mountain streams, the two communities of Vertientes and Planes have kept up a valiant struggle to defend their territory against the invasion and destruction of their surroundings by a variety of outside interests – loggers, cattle ranchers, and other landowners.

The people of Montaña Verde have lived there for generations, living mainly from the food they themselves cultivate. More than one hundred people from the town of Gracias, Lempira, including justice system workers and members of powerful cattle ranching families, claim to own parts of the land, and have attempted to dislodge the communities. The cattle ranchers brought cattle to graze on community lands for decades, destroying the crops and eventually bringing in armed gunmen and threatening to attack the community. A sawmill was also established in the community of Planes, destroying large areas of forest.

The people of Montaña Verde began to organize against these threats and destruction, and decided to fight for a communal land title to their traditional land. They joined COPINH, the Civic Council of Indigenous and Popular Organizations of Honduras, when it was formed in 1993. With the support of the organization, the people of Montaña Verde organized against the sawmill and arranged guard watches at the entrances to the Gracias community.

More recently, repression has been directed against elected community council members.

This has been carried out by fabricating false criminal charges against various community leaders, a method facilitated by the fact that the public prosecutor along with a number of judges in Gracias are among the land claimants. Two council members from Vertientes were arrested in 2001 and 2002 on fabricated charges of robbery, and arrest warrants were issued for a number of other council members.

On January 8<sup>th</sup> 2003, a police operative of some twenty men – including agents of the Cobra special police strike force - at least one civilian in police uniform, and a number of cattle rancher employees – entered the community of Planes at midnight. After riddling the community meeting hall with sub-machine gun bullets, they moved on to the home of Marcelino Miranda, a COPINH leader and indigenous community activist.

Although by law police may only enter a private home between 6am and 6pm, they broke down the door and dragged the entire family outside. All family members including children were forced to lie on the wet ground and were held there for hours at gunpoint, while police beat Marcelino unconscious and extinguished cigarettes on his face. Without identifying themselves or presenting an arrest warrant at any point, police also arrived at Leonardo Miranda's house. Leonardo refused to leave the house until dawn; the police responded by threatening to burn down the house. When he turned himself in at 6am, Leonardo was brutally beaten by

the police. The two brothers were tortured all the way to Gracias, where they were jailed.

Given this horrific sequence of events, it was decided that an international presence could be beneficial to the community: to show international attention and support for Montaña Verde; to witness and record any human rights violations that had occurred or might occur; and possibly to help the mental well-being and feeling of security of the inhabitants. Many community members in Planes, especially the families of the Miranda brothers, are visibly traumatized by the January operative's actions. Other council members feel that they are at risk of similar nighttime

which received its communal land title, in the name of the Indigenous Communal Council of Montaña Verde, in March 2002.

### Vertientes

We arrived in Vertientes in time for me to dump the rain-sweat-mud juice out of my boots, change into dry clothes, and head out to celebrate a Catholic Mass, where we had the opportunity to introduce ourselves. The community already knew Silvestre, a COPINH directive member who works on the Montaña Verde case. Jessica, from Rights Action (the human rights NGO with which I am volunteering), had accompanied us to see

nier in Chiapas and Guatemala. I wanted to explain that I was there as an observer (or possible dissuasion) of any human rights violations, to show solidarity and support for the community, and to learn more about their history and situation. It took me a while to realize the sheer improbability of a well-attended community meeting, due to the amount of work in the fields and homes and also because I had arrived during one of the two sowing seasons.

The next morning, however, I did get the chance to meet with Vertientes council members to introduce myself and discuss my stay in the community. Silvestre had mentioned to them how appreciative we would be if they

could show me around and take me to visit some homes, which are all extremely spread apart among the trees, cornfields and foot-paths that crisscross the area. I have never seen a suggestion so well followed in my life! Every morning for a few hours I had two different council members accompany me all over the community – taking me to visit people's homes, pick blackberries, and trek around, all

the while discussing innumerable aspects of the community and region. I have my months of experience in a variety of communities in Guatemala to thank for my ability to chat about malanga (an edible root vegetable and amazing taste sensation) or converse about the use of the moon cycle in the sowing of corn.

Back at "home" I was treated equally well - in fact so well that I felt rather guilty. As much as I tried to insist in a friendly way



Protest march in Honduras, July 2003

operations and report hearing groups of outsiders walking around the community and shining flashlights into the home of one council member. Although all arrest warrants were supposedly annulled at the end of April, some council members still never sleep at home for fear of being arrested or attacked during the night. Meanwhile, the application for the land title to Planes seems to be stalled or going in circles. The situation is a little calmer in Vertientes,

the community and to ensure that my visit would go well. The two would be leaving that same night to head back to La Esperanza, where COPINH's office is located. I briefly presented myself and the reasons for my visit before the guitar players began once again strumming lively church songs.

I had hoped for a more time-permitting and appropriate opportunity to tell the whole community about myself, and about my experiences as an accompa-

that I would sleep on the floor, I was given a bed, despite the fact that 12 people live in the house and all share beds as it is. Different community members occasionally dropped by with some beans or malanga for my host family. The youngest kids in the house spent time draped over my arm, asking me to draw another chicken on the back of my notebook, or watches onto their wrists. They were asking me what time it was on each of their watches when Felipe dropped by.

I had a few opportunities to talk with Felipe Bejerano during my stay in Vertientes. He and Luis Benites were arrested – Felipe in February 2001 and Luis in February 2002 – on charges of robbery fabricated by the cattle ranchers and their associates. Felipe told me about his time in the Gracias prison. Before all of the inmates were transferred from the old Gracias prison to the new “penal farm,” there was very little space. They had to spend hours standing up in the corridors, with little room to move or sit down, and had to remain there until late at night. The new prison is somewhat better - they even had brownish water somewhat resembling coffee!

They spent their time in each other’s company, working for hours on handicrafts (knotted bracelets, braided cord reins, woven bags, etc) just to make a few Lempiras a day (10 cents to 1 US dollar, varying with the different products and the quantity produced). They also took advantage of the literacy classes offered.

A few months ago they were declared innocent of the charges and were released April 30, 2003. Felipe spent 27 months as a political prisoner and is now back with his family, working tirelessly in all aspects of community life and improvement. His unshakable spirit and dedication is overwhelming.

After a few days, I was already feeling reluctant to leave as I headed down the path toward Planes, accompanied by various Vertientes council members. I was taken to Marcelino Miranda’s house, where I would be staying with his family. Susana, Marcelino’s wife, welcomed me, while her five children peered out from behind her with curiosity. Community members from both Planes and Vertientes were out in the family’s fields sowing corn and beans. This act of solidarity, carried out for both prisoners and for Felipe and Luis before them, is undertaken by the community to support the families of Marcelino and Leonardo while the men remain imprisoned. The family is not able to visit Marcelino as often as they might like

to, due to the financial strain of the journey.

The Miranda brothers’ 80-year

old mother tells me how much she wishes she could see her sons, but now her legs no longer permit her to undertake the hike.

### **COPINH pushes for better education**

COPINH’s weekday afternoon radio program broadcast snippets of information between the static, something about education and people being “crucified” in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. I didn’t manage to sort out a clear version of the events that took place in my absence until I returned to La Esperanza. Frustrated with the lack of action resulting from more conventional methods of protest, on Thursday June 5<sup>th</sup> COPINH (members from the coordination and from different communities), along with a few dozen sympathetic teachers,

occupied the office of the Departmental Direction of Education in La Esperanza. Supplied with food and coffee, a group of musicians and high spirits, they refused to leave until their demands were met. They were calling for the dismissal of Mario Cantarero, Departmental Director of Education for Intibucá, a halt to the politicization of education, and the restoration of teachers in the communities of the department. The director, a National Party member, had been transferring and appointing teachers according to their political allegiances, and many communities had been left without teachers (who in certain communities continued to collect their salaries without bothering to show up to their positions).

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**The director, a National Party member, had been transferring and appointing teachers according to their political allegiances, and many communities had been left without teachers**

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The next Tuesday the group went to the capital and set up eighteen crosses outside of the presidential residence. Under a giant banner reading “Enough already! No more crucifixion of the people!” they took turns standing tied to the crosses. They achieved a meeting with the Minister of Education in which all of their demands were met. Teachers would be reappointed, the student-teacher ratio would be decreased, and finally, Mario Cantarero would be suspended without pay for two months while an investigation into the allegations would be conducted. A few community members from Montaña Verde, including the untiring Felipe who spent time on one of the crosses, participated in the incredibly successful mobilizations. Planes and Vertientes have also received

their share of neglect and problems regarding education.

Although both communities currently have one teacher each, for approximately seventy-five primary school students in Vertientes and about fifty in Planes, the educational record has been extremely inconsistent. There have been consecutive teachers over the past eight years or so in Planes, but for six years in the 1990s there was no teacher and the school remained closed. There has been no confirmation of funding for the position when the current teachers' contract runs out. The teacher in Vertientes arrived there in March 2003, before which the school had been closed since 1997. There are also a couple of *maestras indígenas* helping the teacher in each community. They are community members participating in a 4-year teacher-training program designed to meet the education needs of communities of indigenous peoples. Carried out by COPINH and the Ministry of Education, the program involves student teachers from the three departments in which COPINH works: Lempira, Intibucá, and La Paz. The program participants receive no financial support, working out of dedication to their communities.

### Last days

My last couple days in Montaña Verde were spent going over all of the notes I had taken down during my stay, grinding corn and making very uneven tortillas, playing with the kids, and hearing Susana tell me how much I would be missed. I headed back to Vertientes to prepare for the 3am trek back down to Monte Verde and the cattle truck ride back into La Esperanza, where I spent a couple of days sick and sleeping. The COPINH office was a frenzy of activity as usual, in part due to the preparations

for the Second Forum Against Damns and the Third Week for Cultural and Biological Diversity, international events held simultaneously in mid July in La Esperanza. My housemates from Rising Roots International, a Chicago-based non-profit organization, were still working 25 hours a day, teaching computer classes to COPINH members and help-

ing the organization with innumerable aspects of the conference preparations. I jumped back into the swing of things, taking on some tasks, including the coordination of Montaña Verde community members' participation in the events.

One morning shortly after my return I had the opportunity to meet two more Montaña Verde

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## Increasing violence in West Papua

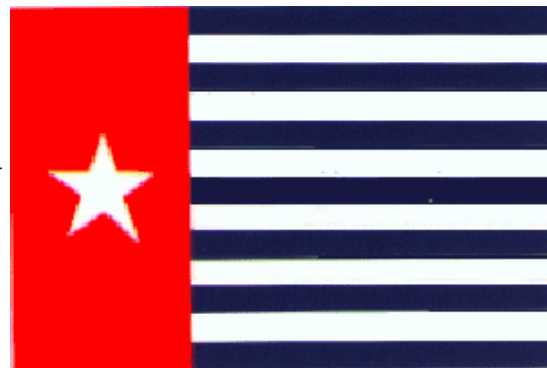
by Indigo Samuelshon and Isidore Fine

**T**ime is running out for West Papuans. The Indonesian Armed Forces murder, rape, torture and detain West Papuans and burn their houses. They specifically target those who desire self-determination and who speak out against the brutality of the Indonesian government.

West Papua is one of the most underdeveloped regions of Indonesia, with very little infrastructure and development, despite the fact that it is rich in minerals and other natural resources. Freeport, an American owned mining company is digging up the heart and soul of the Papuan people as it exploits their land. The Indonesian Armed forces protect the foreign company and its workers. Large revenues are gained from the mining and royalties are paid to the Indonesian government. Unfortunately, very little money is actually invested in West Papua itself.

Many incidents of brutality have revolved around the raising of the Morning Star flag. This flag is a symbol of West Papuan resistance and sovereignty. The flag was created in 1961 when West Papua was preparing to

become an independent nation. In year 2000, in the town of Wamena, thirteen Papuans were shot dead when the local police forcibly tried to take down the Morning Star Flags in the town. Twenty-two other Papuans were arrested, detained and tortured while in detention and one died in police custody. This has become known as the 'Bloody Wamena Incident'. The arrestees were



found guilty of rebellion and a series of other small offences and are currently being detained by the Indonesian government.

After September 11, 2001 the Indonesian government joined the coalition of countries to fight the war against terrorism. Hidden behind this fight the Indonesian armed forces started cracking down on any individual or group who desire

## Dr. Vineeta Gupta fights for health care reform in India

*Dr. Vineeta Gupta is a medical doctor and a human rights activist. She served for ten years in the Punjab Civil Medical Services but resigned under protest in 1997. She is founder and General Secretary of INSAAF International, an organization working for the social, economic and political rights of people; in particular, for the marginalized and vulnerable sections of society, especially women.*

*Dr. Gupta has investigated and reported on human rights violations, corruption by domestic rulers and oppressing economic policies of International Financial Institutions at a grave risk to her career and person. She is subjected to constant persecution, humiliation and harassment. Her harassment cases are well documented by many national and international organizations like the National Human Rights Commission of India and Amnesty International.*

**A**s a Doctor and a human rights activist, I have witnessed how people have completely lost control of their access to health care. (I hesitate to say "health care" because it such a broad term and it doesn't shed light on its smaller components like access to clean water, housing, environment, and all that the people have lost control over.) The multilateral institutions are using a very cunning strategy to slowly take over the whole country. In the provinces, the officials are taking out loans from the World Bank that go directly to them. They do not go to the central government, even though the loans are made out to the Government of India. If it were a centralized policy there would be a lot of collective opposition to this. But they are going to small regions so that every region presents different issues to the World Bank and the regions one by one take over the health care system.

For example, in Punjab, they privatized health care. But the significance of the act is lost on reality. The same state health care officials are still around, the same hierarchical providers are

still around...the only thing that has changed is the name. Meanwhile, nothing has been done to analyze and understand why the state sector was not good. Now, they are turning their backs on the reasons why the state health sector was ailing and they are deliberately trying to blame everything on the sector's lack of finances. So, to raise these funds, they are taking out a loan from the World Bank. But when they do this, there will be certain conditions. Some of them will be written, others will be unclear or covered up with fancy names, and so on. They use fancy names like "structural adjustment program," and "cost effectiveness," to confuse people, and they manipulate their terms when they encounter opposition.

Initially, there two systems at work: private health care and state health care. The State Health care system was the only option for poor people even though it had a lot of deficiencies. There was corruption, inefficiency, inadequacy, bureaucratic problems...But at least the poor patients had options The current reality is that poor people have nowhere to go now. The

self-determination for West Papua. The Indonesian Armed Forces are targeting human rights and NGO workers and anyone perceived as a separatist.

The Institute for Human Rights Study and Advocacy (ELSHAM) is one of West Papua's leading human rights organizations. In December 2002, the wife and daughter of the Executive Director were shot and injured. Prior to this incident, Bonay's car was recently slashed and his home phone line cut. It is currently unknown who the perpetrators are. Yet, the Indonesian military is one of the most prominent suspects who are most likely responsible for these acts.

Another prominent Papuan was not as fortunate as Bonay's family in the struggle for freedom. In November 2001, Theys Hiyo Eluay, a leader of the Papua Council Presidium, a pro-independence political organization, was assassinated. Papuan people viewed Theys as a hero who was able to bring together different tribal groups and fractions of Papuan society. These ethnic and societal cleavages were beginning to work together to achieve independence and mobilize themselves to form a council.

Theys was buried in a field designated as a resting place for the many freedom fighters killed in the struggle for self-determination. The Indonesian military along with a special commission, created by the current president Magawati Sukarnoputri, were responsible for investigating the case. Despite some evidence that has proven his murder, they have done any follow-up investigations, claiming that Theys' death was a normal crime.

Now, more than ever, the Papuan people need the international support in achieving justice and self-determination. We have already witnessed the danger and horror of impunity in

private hospitals will not admit them and the state hospitals charge a fee. Here is a small story about something that happened recently: I was sitting with a colleague from my department when a woman who walked in, with tattered clothes, all beaten up. She had bruises on her face and a lot of injuries on her body. She said that her husband had beaten her up and turned her out of the house. She wanted a medical examination done to document the injuries – as evidence of how she'd been beaten by her husband. But the doctor demanded a fee for the medical treatment. She didn't have money and she certainly couldn't have asked her husband for 50 rupees to go the doctor after he had just beaten her up. So she couldn't get it done. And if she could raise money now, somehow – though it's not possible – how would she be able to fight her case in the courtroom? How does she explain to the court why the medical report was delayed?

So it is not just people's health that is affected, but also their living conditions, their rights and their ability to secure justice. Personally, I can help an individual person, but individuals or NGOs cannot help every poor person out there; that is what the state is there for. That is why there are words like "welfare," "socialist," and "republic," inserted into our constitution. As long as they are there, the government must make a commitment to them. They should be the status quo.

I did a study in which I interviewed 50 women who were building roads. They lived by the roadside. And one morning a pregnant lady, who was earning her living working at the road, went into labor. She had no access to any kind of health care service. She delivered the baby right there with the help of other women who work there using whatever indigenous method

they knew. This is the state of our health care today.

I talked to all those 50 women and nobody had heard of the immunization program; they didn't know what tetanus was. And here was a woman delivering on the road...And I hate the status system. They say things like "this percentage has been immunized, and this many people have access to health care..." I have been a government worker for ten years. I know how they manipulate data by telling us to augment our numbers when they don't meet the expectations of the higher offices. This practice is very counter-productive and it's a self-destruction of resources. There is a lot more going on than meets the eye.



There's a great argument that is advanced whenever we have discussion: they say, "look, we are not messing up health care, the WHO has a different criteria for health. They distinguish primary, secondary and tertiary health care." After sixteen years of medical practice, I am still at a loss as to whether to categorize a patient's health care service under the primary, secondary, or tertiary level. In medical facility, her category may qualify her for an exemption, but in order to receive the same care in an institution that specializes in secondary or tertiary level health care she would have to pay. So, is it the concept or is it the institution that determines what care you receive?

I feel so angry and so frustrated when I talk about it. The issue of access gets totally lost within the discussions of what category of care is being delivered. Either the timing is at fault, or the resources are not there, or the personnel are not there. People actually don't have access at all – don't have a charitable alternative to it all. So, you won't see people dying by the roadside every day, but they are dying in their homes. They stay home to avoid the shame of making it known in public that they cannot afford healthcare. People do not know where to go when they do not have any money to pay for healthcare. When their children are dying, the only thing they can do for them is to give them water, or keep them on their laps. So, when I give an example, a case history, it is not the only example of what is happening out there. It represents hundreds of others who are suffering behind closed doors.

The health care situation has deteriorated totally and in every aspect through the years. Our health priorities are being changed. They are rubbing out our indigenous methods of health care, they are privatizing our health care as it suits them to do so, and they are allocating budgets that either go only to the best medical institutions, or end up in the pockets of bureaucrats and politicians. When you walk to a hospital there is a stark difference between what is in the emergency room, and what is in the bureaucrat's office. In the emergency room the instruments are rusted, there's no light, there is no medicine available. We lack the resources to investigate and document it more closely, but I have witnessed this happening with my own two eyes.

I recently visited a hospital that was very well equipped, as far as the building was concerned. A certain amount of money was allocated to the construction of

the building and that was done. But on the inside, it was totally vacant. They spend this money and we have to pay off the loan, and we have to twist our own arms to sign the treaties for things that the multilateral institutions want. It's not just about health care; it's the larger game of the debt. They want to subjugate us in every possible way. They are uprooting our power provincially so that there is no central consensus on any particular issue, and there is consequently no central movement around it. And moreover, they don't even have to do it with people and resources from the outside; they have our corrupt politicians and bureaucrats here to do it for them.

Initially I had not been that committed to these issues. I just

# Viet Nam twenty-eight years after the war

By Phyllis Bailey

**W**hen I arrived in Viet Nam in January to participate in a study tour, memories I thought I had buried leapt into awareness. The names, Hue, Danang, Ho Chi Minh Trail, Mekong Delta, Haiphong, images of hideously-burned napalm victims, evoked the same emotions I had in the sixties and seventies when Viet Nam was virtually the only headline news.

I recalled my college students in the U.S. who begged me for passing grades to avoid being drafted into the terrifying and controversial war. The Vietnamese obsession with that same war permeates the lives and consciousness even of those who are too young to remember those unhappy times.

As a nation which has hardly ever been free of invaders, the invasion which seems the most significant to the Vietnamese, perhaps because it is the most recent, is what they refer to as The American War. Museums dedicated to memorabilia of that war and of what they call The French War are scattered throughout the nation.

Sites include the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City (still sometimes referred to as Saigon, even by the Vietnamese) displays American armoured vehicles and other war materiel. The Hoa Loa Prison, aka the "Hanoi Hilton," built in 1901 by the French (who imprisoned future leaders of the Communist Government) held U.S. military personnel, most notably Senator John McCain whose photograph as a POW is prominently displayed and pointed out by the guides. The Cu Chi Tunnels, a

120 kilometre underground maze south of Ho Chi Minh City represent, arguably, the most startling reminder of the war. This underground city hid local villagers from the invaders and was also used to launch surprise attacks against American fighters who frequently did not know where the barrage was coming from.

The Vietnamese walk a fine line between a reproachful stance toward the American invaders and the message that all is forgiven; the latter attitude may, to some extent, be economically motivated. The war museums all acknowledge the suffering experienced by the American troops and emphasize that nobody is a winner in war. The Americans, for their part, seem able to assuage some guilt by having their faces rubbed in past misdeeds.

A poignant reminder of the devastation of war is the Vietnamese Friendship Village, established by American Veterans of the War in Vietnam for the victims of Agent Orange, The U.S. has yet to acknowledge officially that Agent Orange, used to defoliate the jungle and expose escaping guerrillas, was harmful to all living things. The facility is mainly used for physically-deformed and mentally handicapped children who receive treatment, education and training, mostly in handicrafts.

I was awed by the adult veterans. As we interacted through interpreters, I experienced a powerful awareness that these men with age-lined faces had fought so fiercely and persistently for liberation and national self-determination. I was impressed that U.S. veterans, some of whom were also victims of Agent Orange, had undertaken

## New economic analysis paper from SJC

**Privatization of public services and natural resource extraction is a standard condition for the World Bank/IMF debt relief program. A new paper just out from the Social Justice Committee and Halifax Initiative Coalition describes the repeated hazards associated with forced privatization worldwide, and challenges arguments of efficiency and economic growth made by the international financial institutions.**

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[www.s-j-c.net](http://www.s-j-c.net)

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this project, partly to acknowledge their nation's responsibility.

My companions on the tour were mainly old-time American left-wingers who had been draft resisters and war protesters. They were proud of their role in helping to end the war and were anxious to see a genuine "socialist" country firsthand.

The ubiquitous presence of Ho Chi Minh is another striking feature of Viet Nam. Numerous monuments, museums and public buildings bear his name and painted or sculpted image. His role as liberator from the imperialist yoke is firmly embedded in the Vietnamese psyche. The cult of personality is particularly evident in the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum in Hanoi. Security is tight; the body search and handbag inspections are not for weapons but for cameras. It is strictly forbidden to photograph the embalmed, life-like body of Uncle Ho. According to the guides, the mausoleum violates his wish to be cremated. They explain that when everybody in Viet Nam has seen his body, it will be cremated.

Although poverty has by no means been eliminated, there appears to be a burgeoning middle class. According to the United Nation's Development Programme, Viet Nam has led the developing world in cutting poverty rates from well over 60% in 1990 to 32% in 2002.

Motorbikes have replaced bicycles as the transportation of choice. Class distinctions occur between those who can afford the expensive Japanese bikes and those who have to settle for the low-quality Chinese model which costs about \$200 U.S. and can be purchased on the installment plan. The motor-bike traffic jams are so massive and the driving is so aggressive that I, an intrepid Montreal pedestrian, was never able to cross the street on foot from my hotel in Hanoi.

Viet Nam is a nation of numer-

ous small entrepreneurs but the presence of trans-nationals provides clear evidence of the move toward globalization and a free market economy. The centerpiece and main purpose of our tour was to attend a Conference on The Global Economy and the National State at the Ho Chi Minh Political Academy in Hanoi.

Only one paper presented at the conference focused specifically on globalization issues as they applied to Viet Nam. Professor Tran Van Binh of the Ho Chi Minh Political Academy was open in his acknowledgement of the many problems still facing Viet Nam.

In 1986, the 6th National Congress of the Communist Party of Viet Nam voted to abandon a subsidy economy for a market economy. Because globalization is essentially a capitalist endeavour, the drastic shift in economic thinking led to many changes which had an impact not only on economic life but also on cultural and social life.

Dr. Tran sees this as both positive and negative, positive because it eliminated the stagnation, apathy and dependency on the state which he believes results from a subsidy-based economy, negative because of the emphasis on materialism and consumerism at the expense of spiritual and moral values.

He claims there have been positive changes in many sectors of society, including the development of science and technology. He cited statistics showing that the standard of living even in remote areas has improved. Education, health care and links with information technology have all been upgraded as a result of the new market economy. He quoted a survey taken in 2001 which revealed that 23% of Ha-

noi households had personal computers, more than 83% owned motorbikes and more than 98% had television sets.

He called for a strengthening of the party and the state to counteract the negative effects of the market economy and globalization. Ironically, along with Lenin's statement that "the Party represents conscience, wisdom and honour," Dr. Tran declared the desirability of a government "of the people, by the people and for the people. . ."

Popular attractions were not neglected on our tour. Along with museum and Pagoda visits, we had excursions to Halong Bay and the Mekong Delta, again fraught with memories of the war. As our boats glided down the Mekong River, we all understood why the Americans were defeated by the hostile jungle on each bank and by the guerrillas for whom the jungle was a familiar setting and represented no threat.

The countryside was replete with rice paddies and peasants bent over harvesting the rice. Water buffalo were a constant reminder that we were in Asia. Occasional glimpses of shantytowns hinted that poverty and substandard housing were still a reality.

An increasing concern for human rights advocates is the continued oppression and persecution of the Montagnards in the Central Highlands on religious and ethnic grounds. Human Rights Watch has also drawn attention to the arrests and imprisonment of dissidents expressing their views on the Internet. These infractions have not prevented World Bank and various donor nations from pouring loans into Viet Nam, although they have made perfunctory re-

**We are saddened to hear of the death of Lanie Melamud, longtime SJC supporter. Lanie contributed immeasurably to the struggle for social justice and a healthy planet in many ways throughout her life.**

# Échos de la caravane paysanne Mexique-Québec

Par Karen Rostchild, Comité pour la justice sociale (Social Justice Committee) et Marie-Hélène Côté, Comité Chrétien pour les droits humains en Amérique Latine (CCDHAL)

*Le Comité pour la justice sociale a pu inviter les représentants de trois organismes paysans du sud du Mexique pour faire une tournée d'information et d'échanges au Québec, du 10 au 25 mars 2003. Cette visite, dont on a parlé dans notre dernier édition d'Upstream Journal, a eu lieu grâce à l'appui du Ministère des Relations Internationales du Québec, par l'entremise de l'AQOCI et de Développement et Paix. Les visiteurs ont rencontré des membres de l'Union paysanne, des étudiants en agriculture, des groupes sociaux et le grand public, dans les régions suivantes : les Basses Laurentides, le centre du Québec, la Montérégie, le Bas du fleuve, la grande région de Québec et les villes de Montréal, Québec et Victoriaville.*

MH : Ça fait un peu plus d'un an que tu m'as parlé du projet pour la première fois, alors que tu rédigeais la demande, et maintenant c'est déjà le temps de rassembler les souvenirs et de faire les bilans! Comment t'était venue cette idée?

K : L'idée est née quand je regardais ce qui se passait dans le sud du Mexique avec le Plan Puebla-Panamá (PPP). Dans plusieurs états du sud du Mexique, les paysans contrôlent toujours une bonne partie des terres. Ainsi l'objectif du PPP est précisément de chasser ces paysans de leurs terres pour qu'elles pas-

sent sous le contrôle des multinationales. On voit donc que l'opposition au PPP est fondamentalement une revendication de l'agriculture et du mode de vie des paysans. Du côté du Québec, c'est clair que la lutte de l'Union paysanne (U.P.) se résume à un effort pour faire renaître et défendre l'agriculture paysanne. Je me suis ensuite demandé si en faisant se rencontrer ces deux mondes, très différents mais ayant une lutte en commun, on pouvait les mettre en situation de

MH : Oui, il me paraissait important que les paysans mexicains puissent échanger avec des agriculteurs québécois et connaître leur milieu de vie, c'est-à-dire la campagne, et qu'ils ne restent pas dans les villes à écouter la perception des citadins et des intellectuels sur cette problématique. C'est pour cela que l'idée d'une tournée m'a semblé intéressante.

Par un froid de canard et dans une épaisse couverture de neige, on a visité diverses exploitations



s'appuyer mutuellement.

Je savais que les membres de l'Union paysanne avaient une idée générale de ce qui se passait à la campagne mexicaine, mais qu'il leur manquait beaucoup de détails là-dessus. Et du côté mexicain, j'ai constaté des préjugés étonnants dans leur connaissance de l'agriculture québécoise et canadienne. En effet, j'ai même lu dans un texte mexicain qu'ici on n'utilise pas de pesticides!

Mais c'était toi, Marie-Hélène, qui a eu l'idée de la forme que le projet a finalement pris.

agricoles au cours de la tournée, allant d'une production de plantes médicinales à une ferme laitière biologique, en passant par un éleveur de cerfs rouges et des producteurs de légumes en serres. Malgré le fait que les érables n'étaient pas encore entaillés, nous avons pu parcourir une érablière en traîneau attelé à des chevaux. Nous avons même eu la chance d'être reçus à un souper traditionnel de cabane à sucre qui a fait le régal de nos invités mexicains!

K : Tu as parlé du froid, et en effet, quand on a fait l'invitation aux Mexicains, on leur a dit qu'il

fallait se préparer à affronter le froid. Ils se sont si bien acclimatés qu'au milieu de la tournée, on a vu l'un d'entre eux se promener dans la neige sans manteau ni tuque...

MH : Un autre important objet de fascination pour eux, c'était les serres. Ils nous ont expliqué que dans leurs régions, à certaines périodes de l'année, ils souffrent d'un excès de chaleur humide qui rend difficile la culture de certains légumes, dont les tomates. C'est pourquoi ils ont trouvé très intéressant le greffage pratiqué par les cultivateurs de tomates biologiques du Québec dans le but d'accroître la résistance des plantes. Les visiteurs ont pensé qu'il serait peut-être possible de produire des tomates biologiques en serres dans leurs régions. À leur connaissance, on n'utilise actuellement les serres au Mexique que pour la production de fleurs. Ils ont été très impressionnés par le fait que les étudiants puissent bénéficier d'une formation en production agricole en serres. C'est avec un certain regret que nos invités ont admiré les grandes serres dans les cégeps de Victoriaville et de La Pocatière car ils aimeraient que leurs jeunes puissent aussi jouir de telles opportunités.

K : Quels ont été les faits marquants du séjour de votre partenaire – le président de CHUDEB (Chimalapas Unis pour le Défense de l'Ethno-biodiversité) ici?...Étant donné que les stagiaires de Québec Sans Frontières du CCDHAL et toi aient passé une journée de planification du stage avec votre partenaire qui était aussi l'un des invités.

MH : D'abord, il a souligné à plusieurs reprises le grand contraste entre les « petits » producteurs d'ici et les petits paysans mexicains; ça semblait très frappant pour lui que le fermier les recevant dans sa belle grande maison, en leur montrant une exploitation agricole dont ils

n'oseraient jamais rêver, se nomme « petit producteur ». Néanmoins, il voyait plusieurs parallèles entre les luttes menées ici et au Mexique. Il a vite remarqué que, dans les deux cas, les structures politiques et économiques favorisent les grandes exploitations agro-industrielles, mais nuisent aux petits producteurs, voire les menacent de disparition. D'autre part, au niveau de l'organisation, il a observé qu'il n'y avait pas beaucoup de coopératives de travail agricole et a trouvé cela dommage. Par contre, il a trouvé très intéressante et importante la participation citoyenne à l'U.P. : le fait que des « citoyens- consommateurs » soient membres et appuient les fermiers donne beaucoup plus de force au mouvement.

K : En effet, quand ils ont résumé leurs expériences, les trois visiteurs ont conclu que malgré les grands écarts, il s'agissait de la même lutte paysanne. Une autre chose que j'ai pu noter, peut-être en vertu de mon âge, c'est que quand j'étais jeune, il était chose courante d'affirmer que l'environnementalisme était un luxe pour les citoyens gâtés des pays riches. En fait, c'est loin d'être le cas : les visiteurs ont mis beaucoup d'emphase sur l'importance d'une nourriture saine. Pour eux, il s'agit d'une nourriture cultivée dans la communauté ou la région de la façon la plus naturelle possible. En outre, ils ont beaucoup insisté sur la nocivité des produits chimiques; ils ont vu de leurs propres yeux les effets toxiques de produits couramment utilisés dans les campagnes mexicaines. Avec l'appui de leurs organismes, ils font leur part pour éduquer leurs voisins et promouvoir l'agriculture biologique.

Nos visiteurs nous ont raconté qu'au sud du Mexique, il y a une volonté de raviver et promouvoir les marchés locaux dans le but d'appuyer l'économie régionale

paysanne et aussi de valoriser les productions locales. On nous a expliqué que la *milpa*<sup>1</sup> traditionnelle était beaucoup plus qu'un champ de maïs : c'était un lieu privilégié pour le compagnonnage de cultures. En outre, autour de la *milpa*<sup>1</sup>, il y avait des légumes cultivés et sylvestres qui sont maintenant presque oubliés, mais les organismes en question essaient de récupérer. On nous a dit que parfois il faut rappeler aux paysans ce qui faisait partie de leur tradition alimentaire jusqu'à il y a trente ans et on nous a aussi dit que les marchés locaux sont les débouchés naturels pour ces cultures en récupération.

Il est intéressant de noter qu'en entendant ça, un membre de l'Union paysanne a remarqué qu'il n'est plus possible de faire cette sorte de récupération au Québec; selon lui, ici les vieilles traditions agricoles sont effectivement mortes bien qu'il ait mentionné des efforts dans certains pays européens pour récupérer les traditions agricoles.

MH : C'est plus difficile au Mexique de compter sur l'appui des citoyens-consommateurs : en effet, si les communautés voisines sont aussi pauvres que celles de nos invités, où peuvent-ils vendre leurs produits biologiques à un juste prix?

K : Je crois que tu arrives au noyau du problème. La crise actuelle de l'agriculture paysanne mexicaine est tellement profonde que ce sera vraiment difficile de s'en sortir. On parle d'une situation dans laquelle environ 4 paysans sur 10 seulement ont des produits à mettre sur le marché. En plus, il n'y a qu'environ un tiers des petits producteurs qui réussissent à vivre de leurs exploitations. Cependant, en ce qui concerne les citoyens mexicains, il y a une petite note d'espoir : tu vas te souvenir qu'à notre présentation à Québec, il y avait dans l'assistance un jeune

Mexicain qui nous a raconté un peu son expérience au sein de l'équipe d'un magasin coopératif, situé à Cuernavaca. Ils y vendaient des produits agricoles et artisanaux issus du commerce équitable mexicain, mais ils devaient déployer beaucoup d'efforts pour survivre à cause du manque de fonds d'opération. De même, on sait qu'il y a aussi un grand effort dans la ville de México de promouvoir la consommation du café équitable mexicain, c'est-à-dire le café issu de l'agriculture paysanne.

Marie-Hélène, je voudrais profiter de cette occasion pour te remercier de tout le travail que tu as fait pour que le projet fonctionne et, je l'espère, ait pu réussir. Être traductrice et chauffeuse n'est pas toujours chose facile, surtout pour une quinzaine de jours en plein milieu de l'hiver québécois. Avant de terminer, est-ce que je peux te demander ce que cette expérience a signifié pour toi?

MH : Beaucoup de choses... Entre autres, ça a signifié une chance unique d'assister et de prendre part aux échanges entre les paysans mexicains et toutes les person-

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## **“DROP THE DEBT - SCRAP THE SAPS!”**

Summer is over, vacations are done for another year, and all the postcards you wrote have probably reached their destinations by now. But there is one more card the Social Justice Committee would like you to send.

Our postcards have cartoons on one side and a message on the other, and they are addressed to your local Member of Parliament. In each set, there are 29 different images and messages. Taken together, they spell out this: debt is still crushing the Third World and must be cancelled, without any conditions.

The postcards are part of the SJC's “Drop the Debt - Scrap the SAPs!” action campaign. Following up on the global *Jubilee 2000* campaign, “Drop the Debt - Scrap the SAPs!” calls for the unconditional cancellation of the debts of the world's poorest countries. As part of this campaign, the SJC is offering popular education presentations on Third World debt to interested groups across Canada. After each presentation, groups are asked to send their MP the postcards, which detail the history and impacts of debt. Next, the group meets with the MP to discuss how to carry the campaign further within the federal government and have the debts cancelled. The SJC provides groups with support and campaign updates.

As regular readers of the *Upstream Journal* will recognize, when countries must devote scarce resources to repaying foreign debts, poverty and hunger are the result. Third World debts were often contracted by dictators who stole the borrowed money for their own use. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank force countries to adopt structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) to repay the debts. These involve privatizing such essential public services as water distribution, and opening up economies to transnational corporations and free trade, actions with a devastating impact on people's lives.

Under pressure from *Jubilee 2000*, the Canadian government agreed to cancel debts owed to Canada, but it has done little to cancel the debts owed to the IMF and the World Bank, although Canada is a member of both. Nor has it called for an end to SAPs. Debt and SAPs have had severe impacts:

- In 2001, at the insistence of the IMF, Ghana began privatizing water systems, cutting off 35 per cent of Ghanaians from access to water.
- In 2000, debt forced Zambia to sell off the copper mines that provide most of its foreign exchange earnings, only to see the private company that bought them close them down. Zambia cannot afford to feed its people but must still pay \$150 million a year in debt service.
- Although one in three Nicaraguans is malnourished, the IMF withheld debt relief in 2001 because the country had failed to adequately cut spending and privatize utilities.

This campaign combines the strengths of the SJC: education, advocacy and membership. Strong member support has helped the SJC develop quality educational tools and given us the clout to address decision-makers on debt. Now, the SJC seeks help from supporters to carry this work even further. You can get involved by helping arrange a presentation for a group in your community, by spreading the word about the campaign to others, or by putting the SJC in contact with key people in your area.

To book a presentation or for more information, please contact Eric Lamoureux or Ernie Schibli at 514-933-6797 or [sjc@web.ca](mailto:sjc@web.ca). Generous support for this campaign has come from the *Association québécoise des organismes de coopération internationale*.

Dear Friends:

As readers of the Upstream Journal, you are no doubt very aware that, despite the inauguration promises of Mexican President Vicente Fox, in the last two and a half years there has been little substantive improvement in the human rights situation in Mexico. International treaties have been ratified, some well-known prisoners of conscience have been released, the federal government has shown somewhat more openness to human rights organizations, but human rights defenders continue to be persecuted, the Mexican army remains in Chiapas and in other indigenous regions of Mexico, and the economic situation of the majority of the population has deteriorated to the point where over 60% of working Mexicans enjoy no social benefits.

It is in this context that the Social Justice is seeking to expand the Mexico section of the Canada/Central America/Mexico Urgent Action Network, that is to say that we are looking for SJC supporters who would be willing to participate in letter-writing campaigns to the Mexican government with regard to human rights violations. Our campaigns are particularly focused on social, economic, and environmental rights and on the social implications of civil and political rights. Most of our urgent actions concern violations of the human rights of rural Mexicans, including violations of the collective rights of indigenous Mexicans.

Today's appeal to you is dramatized by the fact that this very month two lawyers involved in the defence of the human rights of indigenous Mexicans have been assassinated: Griselda Tirado worked to promote the human rights of the Totonaca indigenous people of the northern region of the state of Puebla; Carlos Sánchez was the legal advisor to the Citizens Committee of Union Hidalgo, a largely indigenous municipality in the state of Oaxaca.

In rural Mexico, to defend indigenous rights is to confront a local power elite that has derived economic benefit and political strength from the denial of human rights. Very often the interests of this local elite coincide (or can be made to coincide) with what has become known as the "neoliberal agenda", that is to say with the development programmes promoted or imposed by Mexican and international corporations and facilitated by the international financial institutions. In Union Hidalgo, for instance, an important element in the local political conflict that has given rise to tragic human rights violations is an illegal attempt on the part of the municipal mayor to build an industrial shrimp farm. Such an installation, designed to ship a commercial product to outside markets, would seriously damage the local fishery that supplies food to local people.

For the Social Justice Committee, the defence of human rights by means of urgent actions has social and political as well as humanitarian implications. We believe that it is very important that urgent actions continue to be sent to the Mexican government (and to the governments of Central America). Were the urgent action letters to cease to arrive, the governments concerned would no doubt conclude that their public relations campaigns have been successful, that the world believes that (in the words of President Fox himself) there is "holy peace in Chiapas" and elsewhere - and that they, the governments and their international backers, have a "carte blanche" to promote development programmes which enrich outside investors and destroy local communities.

So, the reason for this particular urgent action letter is to call upon as many SJC supporters as possible to join the Urgent Action Network and/or to spread the word to their friends and acquaintances who might also be interested in joining. If you join the Network, it does not mean that you have made a commitment to reply to all of the urgent action appeals. You are simply asked to read the information contained in the appeals and to respond as often as you have time to do so.

With very many thanks for the time and attention that you have given to this letter.

Sincerely,

Karen Rothschild  
Coordinator, SJC Mexico Program and Urgent Action Centre

Bien qu'on ne soit pas en mesure de traduire la plupart des actions urgentes, c'est avec une grande satisfaction que le Comité pour la justice sociale accueille des membres francophones (pouvant lire l'anglais) au Réseau pan-canadien. Il va sans dire que les participant-e-s francophones peuvent rédiger leurs lettres en français (ou en espagnol). Il nous fera plaisir de répondre en français à toute demande de renseignements.