



Is this peace?

Story and photos by Michael Flynn

The civil war ended six years ago. Although Guatemala's uprooted are trying to rebuild their lives, extreme poverty, violence, distrust, and fear remain.

DURING GUATEMALA'S 36-YEAR CIVIL war, more than a million people were driven from their homes. This spring, I visited the country to see how, six years after the signing of "a firm and lasting peace" between the government and the guerrillas, these uprooted people were getting along in their attempts to rebuild their lives and reintegrate into society.

Although I was focused on the situation today, the past was omnipresent. Conversations began with the past, memorials to the dead stood in villages, clandestine graves packed with the victims of massacres were being exhumed and evidence gathered for genocide trials, and the news was filled with stories about how the problems of the past—extreme hunger and poverty, high levels of violence and human rights abuses, distrust and fear—remained today.

Most of the war's victims—more than 80 percent—were Mayan Indians. Conversing with

them can require patience. Using halting Spanish, they answer questions slowly, *poco a poco*, stoically, their faces often revealing little emotion in spite of the horrors they might be describing. One thing is clear: For them, *la violencia* of the past and the problems of today are inextricably linked.

I met Marcos, a 31-year-old Ixil Indian, at the offices of the Communities of Population in Resistance-Sierra (CPR-Sierra) in Guatemala City. CPR-Sierra, one of three CPR organizations, was

formed in the 1980s by groups of highly organized internally displaced people whose presumed ties to the guerrillas made them a military target. When I asked Marcos if he could tell me about himself and the work of CPR, he began:

"In those times, in the year 1981, the population started to resist. I was 10 when the repression began. I lived in the hamlet of Sacsihuán, municipality of Nebaj, department [state] of Quiché. Through cooperatives among our people and our parents we had organized. But when the military learned about our cooperative, they started to accuse people. . . . The people who lived in my mother's village, they go out to work every day. But the military had taken over the coffee *finca* [farm] and were installed there, about 200 soldiers. When the *mozos* [teenagers]

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A displaced family from the community of Los Cimientos in the Ixil region.



went to work, one day they did not return. That is what the village saw; all the villages saw the massacres and captures, heard the sound of bullets. And then we went *bajo la montaña*” (literally, “beneath the mountain”).

What was your relationship to the guerrillas while you were in the mountains?

“I’m coming to that. So, we as a population are in the mountains, we are defending ourselves, we are vigilant. . . . After a while, the guerrilla appeared, and the guerrilla and the army are fighting. . . . The army pursue us because they think that we are the ones fighting them, but we aren’t. It is the guerrilla. When there is a death among the soldiers, then the planes come with bombs and machine guns.”

How long did you live like this?

“We lived for 10 years *bajo la montaña*, always walking, walking. . . . The people would work the land for a while, and then the military would come. . . . Sometimes we would be

near villages, but we could not go in. The commanders of the *patrulleros* [civil patrols, or PACs, which were manned by local campesinos who were forced by the army into military service] would not let us enter. . . . In 1990, we had an assembly of CPR. We talked about how we could get out from under these bombings and offenses. . . . We then announced ourselves to the public, and the government recognized that we were civil society and not guerrillas.”

How did CPR become organized?

“That is another stage. . . . We decided in the mountains in 1989 to join other groups that were thinking of going to the capital to negotiate with the government. . . . After the negotiations, the government promised to buy us land. Some people decided to stay in the mountains, others decided to go to the coast.” (Today, some 1,600 families belong to CPR-Sierra, divided among more than a dozen communities located mostly on the south

Inside a home in the community of Turanza, near Nebaj, Quiché, part of the “Communities of Populations in Resistance” (CPR).

coast or in the Ixil region.)

Now that you have land, why does CPR-Sierra remain active?

“Although the war is over and the government bought us land, we are worried that the peace accords will not be fulfilled. We are demanding compensation, better homes. If you go to my community in Esquintla [a department on the south coast], you will see we don’t have good homes. Only metal sheets. We are demanding light, electricity, water. We don’t have a health center, we don’t have a school.”

IN HIS 1993 BOOK, *BETWEEN TWO Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala*, David Stoll describes the “zones of refuge” used by refugees like Marcos: “Eighteen kilometers

north of the town of Nebaj rise the rocky outcrops of Mount Sumal, 6,000 feet above surrounding valleys. It is a huge, pitiless massif, on the flanks of which travelers can spend days struggling in and out of ravines thousands of feet deep. . . . For the Guerrilla Army of the Poor [EGP], its zone of refuge on Sumal was code-named ‘Namibia’ or ‘Vietnam.’ Until the army offensive that ended it, more than 5,000 people lived among the crevices and shoulders of Sumal . . . one of three refugee zones defended by the EGP along the northern rim of Ixil country. . . . In the early 1980s 50,000 people may have taken shelter in [these mountains].”

Two decades ago, hell was unleashed in Ixil country. When the Guerrilla Army of the Poor began organizing in the region in the late 1970s, it was unprepared to confront the fury of the military’s counter-insurgency machine or to protect all its supporters, many of whom were eager to join its ranks after suffering years of abuse from landowners and government authorities. A principal weapon used by the military to eradicate the guerrilla threat and destroy

local sympathy was fire. The Historical Clarification Commission, a U.N.-sponsored truth commission whose report, *Memory of Silence*, was released in 1999, found that 70–90 percent of Ixil communities—some 90 villages—were burned to the ground between 1980–1983 as part of the military’s scorched earth campaign.

The violence in Ixil tore families and communities apart. Although many were able to flee and joined the guerrillas or burgeoning displaced populations, others were forced by the military into “model villages,” were tortured and “reeducated” at military garrisons, or were made to serve in the *patrulleros*. The military massacred thousands; the guerrillas executed dozens, possibly hundreds, for trying to turn themselves in to authorities. The civil patrols, armed with hunting rifles, machetes, or clubs—and often driven by the fear that the army would execute their families if they didn’t cooperate—kidnapped, tortured, or murdered neighbors who were suspected of supporting the guerrillas. No one was untouched. A common phrase



Below, the community of Turanza. At right, two displaced children from Los Cimientos.



used to describe the period is that the *tejido social* (social fabric) had been torn.

Can a society recover from such violence and reconcile its differences? Can it, as one author writes, “reweave the torn”? I found some positive signs in Ixil country. Diego Rivera, the director of the Nebaj-based organization, the Regional Movement of Uprooted People for the North of Quiché, told me: “Our vision as an organization is that the armed conflict was not caused by the population. It was a problem of the state that made all this happen, that led to massacres and to *tierra arrasada* [scorched earth]. We have learned about the causes of the conflict and come to understand that it was not the fault of the PAC, nor of the guerrillas, nor of those who had to serve in the army. The entire population was a victim. Now we seek an organization of all of us, a social organization that can confront the government and tell them of our problems and demand indemnification.”

Goodwill alone, however, may not be enough to overcome a central dilemma confronting much of



The returnee community of Nuevo Amanecer, in the department of San Marcos.

Guatemala—the scarcity of productive land available to campesinos, who since time immemorial have relied on the *milpa* (corn fields) as the basis of their livelihood. As part of a tour of the *Triangulo Ixil*—the military’s name for the region’s three municipalities: Nebaj, Cotzal, and Chajul—Rivera took me to a displaced community for whom the war has not yet ended. This community of some 1,000 Quiché Indians—an ethnic minority in the Ixil region—lives in wooden or sheet metal shacks standing precariously in small groups along the bottom of a broad ravine high in the Cuchumatanes mountains. They have been on the move since June 2001, when suspected former PAC members drove them from their homes in the village of Los Cimientos, not far from Chajul. When I visited in April, they had little food. The children’s stomachs were distended, their faces swollen from frostbite.

This is not the first time these Quichés have been uprooted. In

1982, they were forced to flee when the military began executing its scorched earth campaign and installed units in Los Cimientos. Although they won various petitions regarding title to their land, the Quichés were prevented from returning to Los Cimientos until 1994, when solidarity groups accompanied several families back to the village. Over the next several years, as other families gradually returned and the community tried to reestablish itself, various appeals were filed on their behalf in Guatemala and with the Inter-

American Commission on Human Rights. Myriad national and international organizations investigated the case—the United Nations sent a representative, various government land and conflict resolution agencies offered proposals and counterproposals to resolve the situation, and human rights groups took up their cause.

Quichés lived side by side with the Ixils who had taken over the land. Last June, after they rejected a government proposal to divide the property, the neighboring Ixils decided that they had had enough. According to Quiché community members, armed men stormed into their village at dawn, announced that they had two hours to leave, and then raped two women in front of the entire community. Their homes and build-

Poza Rica, Chiapas: Former refugees who remained in Mexico and became naturalized citizens.



ings were destroyed or occupied, their possessions stolen, and their crops confiscated. No arrests were made. One of the community leaders told me: “People from Chajul came to help them, there were about a hundred of them. We lived together for almost eight years, and yes we had problems over land. Unfortunately, the government did not have the valor to uphold the law. It is afraid of the Chajul people.”

According to Contierra, a government agency set up under the peace accords to mediate land disputes, the Quichés and the government signed an agreement in mid-September giving the community a *finca* on the south coast. When the Quichés eventually move to their new homes, which may take some time, they will confront a host of new problems stemming from radical climate change, different agricultural patterns, and new social arrangements with surrounding communities.

BY THE TIME THE INK HAD DRIED ON Guatemala’s U.N.-brokered peace accords, as many as 200,000 people had been killed or disappeared, the vast majority during the military’s reign of terror in the early 1980s. The Historical Clarification Commission concluded that more than 90 percent of the “human rights violations and acts of violence” were committed by the army or other state security forces, including the civil patrols, police forces, and death squads. Presiding over the terror was a series of military dictators, one of the last of whom was Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt, an evangelical Christian who took power in 1982. By the time he was ousted in 1983, some of the worst atrocities in Guatemalan history had been perpetrated, including the massacre at Dos Erres, during which as many as 300 men, women, and children were murdered by a special military unit called the *kaibiles*. According to an Amnesty



International report, under Ríos Montt’s watch, the army committed thousands of extrajudicial killings. “People of all ages were not only shot, they were burned alive, hacked to death, disemboweled, drowned, beheaded. Small children were smashed against rocks or bayoneted to death.” (President Ronald Reagan dismissed the growing criticism of Ríos Montt at the time, saying that he was receiving “a bum rap.”)

Today Ríos Montt is a member of Congress and president of the ruling party, the Guatemalan Republican Front. Ironically, his brother, Bishop Mario Ríos Montt, is head of the Catholic Church’s human rights office, whose teams of forensic anthropologists dug up evidence from the past that could be used in genocide cases against the former dictator. Quipped one human rights worker I

One of a handful of returnee families in the community of Magnolia Miramar who still live in UNHCR-distributed tents, three years after their return from Mexico.

spoke with: “I sure am glad that I don’t have to sit at that family’s dinner table.”

Bishop Ríos Montt succeeded Bishop Juan Gerardi, who was bludgeoned to death in 1998, just two days after the monumental report, *Guatemala: Nunca Más (Never Again)*, was released. Although *Nunca Más*, which was undertaken by the church’s Recuperation of Historical Memory project, and the U.N.-sponsored Historical Clarification Commission (CEH) arrived at very similar conclusions, they had one crucial difference: CEH was restricted from naming perpetrators; the Catholic Church’s report was

not. An entire chapter of the church's four-volume report is devoted to the "Government of Ríos Montt."

Nunca Más estimates that by the mid-1980s, some 1.5 million people had been displaced by the war, or about one of every eight Guatemalans. (CEH offers a range, 500,000 to 1.5 million—"the variability of the statistics [reflecting] the changing nature of displacement.") Up to a million were internally displaced; several hundred thousand fled to Mexico and the United States; the rest were scattered between Belize, Honduras, and Costa Rica. "Displacement was not just a consequence of the violence," states *Nunca Más*, "it became the objective of political counterinsurgency, especially in the zones of grave social conflict, or where the guerrilla was present or had influence. Displacement was also a mechanism used by distinct populations to defend their lives."

Persecution didn't end with exile. The military pursued displaced groups through the mountains and attacked refugee camps across the

A displaced man from Quetzaltenango holds up fabric he wove on the loom seen in the background.



border in Mexico. Undocumented refugees in Mexico—only about a third of the refugees there, some 47,000, were registered with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)—were often harassed or arrested by Mexican police; and those who made it to the United States were often forced to hide from authorities because the Reagan administration was reluctant to grant asylum to refugees who weren't fleeing communist countries.

Studying the refugees' plight was also a dangerous undertaking: In 1990, Myrna Mack, a Guatemalan anthropologist doing pioneering work on the impact of displacement in rural areas, was stabbed to death outside her office in Guatemala City. Although a soldier was convicted of carrying out the killing in 1993, its intellectual authors went on trial only recently (as of this writing, in late September, a decision in the case was still pending).

In the late 1980s, refugees in Mexico began trickling back to Guatemala under a government program that subjected returnees to military control in their home communities or model villages. In the meantime, refugees living in UNHCR camps in

Chiapas and two other Mexican states organized an impressive representative body called the Permanent Commissions, which negotiated directly with the Guatemalan government the terms and conditions of the return. In the accord, signed in 1992, the government agreed to allow the collective return of refugees in a safe and secure environment—UNHCR and several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) accompanied the refugees—and to implement reintegration programs that included access to land and credit.

By the time the first group of returnees arrived under this agreement in early 1993, the peace process was in full swing. One of the early accords agreed to by the government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union was the Agreement on the Resettlement of Uprooted Populations, signed in June 1994. Although this agreement was less ambitious than the 1992 accord in terms of reintegration efforts, its mandate included all displaced populations (including tens of thousands of "dispersed refugees," who remained outside UNHCR protection while in Mexico). It also benefited from oversight by the U.N. Verification Mission in Guatemala (Minugua), established to verify the government's implementation of the peace accords. By 1999, when the last group of returnees arrived, nearly 45,000 had repatriated. Several thousand others accepted a Mexican government offer to stay in Mexico and become naturalized citizens.

In Guatemala, the *retornados* (returnees) faced the same rural poverty and underdevelopment that the rest of the country's poor campesinos confronted. There was, however, one critical difference: The *retornados* were organized. While in Mexico, they received human rights training from international NGOs, learned to speak Spanish, became politically aware, and banded together across ethnic lines. Their organizational strength enabled the re-



Separating coffee beans in the returnee community of Magnolia Miramar.

tornados, as well as the CPR groups, to receive better support from the government and international aid agencies. In contrast, many *dispersos* (dispersed refugees) and hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people remained anonymous out of fear or lack of awareness of the benefits they could receive. (Some of the *dispersos*, however, were able to achieve substantial support upon their return—those who formed the guerrillas’ so-called fifth force, which served as a sort of social base for the insurgency in exile, and those supported by the Catholic Church.) Meanwhile, many of the refugees in the United States are still struggling to legalize their status, despite the fact that they have developed vibrant communities in large urban centers like Chicago.

To this day it is unclear what became of thousands of anonymous displaced people. Many live in shanty towns near Guatemala City, others remain in the countryside, forgotten, without personal documentation, jobless, and landless. One displaced family I met, living on a tiny plot of land several miles outside the city of Quetzaltenango, cobbled together what little money they had to buy a

large, complicated loom. Although they admitted not knowing how to use it properly, they somehow managed to make a few *huipiles*—multi-colored dresses used by indigenous women—which they then tried to sell on the street with little success.

Even the international NGO refugee advocacy community seems unsure how to categorize these people—are they still displaced, or just extremely poor people struggling to survive? In 1996, the U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR) stated that Guatemala had 200,000 internally displaced people; in 1997, it listed 250,000; in 1998, zero. Explaining the numbers, USCR said, “Although many Guatemalans who were forcibly displaced in the early 1980s remained away from their homes in 1998, USCR no longer included them in its listing. . . . Displaced Guatemalans who wish to return home are no longer prevented from doing so by conflict or fear of persecution. For most, the barrier is the government’s lack of political will and/or resources to provide the displaced the land and assistance they would need to return” (“The Global IDP Database,” www.idpproject.org).

Many of the internally displaced are organized, however, and making their presence known. In April, members of the National Council for Displaced Guatemalans (Condeg), an organization set up in 1989, occupied the offices of a land trust fund set up under the peace accords. Unlike the anonymous displaced, many Condeg members received support under the accords. According to a Minugua verification report, Condeg occupied the offices to demand “access to land and disbursement of funds in order to revive economic activity on the farms that had already been bought.” Said one Condeg member I interviewed: “There

are many, many more of us who have [not received aid]. Many who had been organizing for years got tired of waiting and left. Others are still afraid to be associated with an organization since the conflict. To organize a group requires a lot of effort.” He then optimistically added, “But at least we are known nationally and internationally.”

LIFE HAS ALSO BEEN ROUGH FOR THOSE who returned under the auspices of the accords. Relations with neighboring communities are sometimes strained, and *retornados* grumble about everything from their inability to find jobs or sell crops to the dramatic change in climate between the camps in Mexico and their new homes. The government has failed to fulfill many of its commitments related to reintegration, job training, and community development. Many feel

Pascual Ortiz, a member of the community of Xamán, inspects cardamom plants.





A girl from Acul, one of the first model villages established by the military in the Ixil region, points to a row of crosses at a mass grave.

the future looked brighter in Mexico and long to return. Over the past few years, hundreds of families have gone back to Mexico—this time not as refugees, but as undocumented migrants.

There are some bright spots. Returnees have established schools that are used by children from surrounding communities, many remain organized in cooperatives that have managed to survive despite declining prices for cash crops like coffee and cardamom, and their awareness has made them a political force in local communities. Marco Ramirez Vargas, a former CPR member, is now the mayor of the municipality of Playa Grande—one of the most heavily militarized areas of the country in the 1980s. Although the genocide cases are only inching along, the search for evidence continues in the

face of death threats. And in September, organizations representing the uprooted and other victims negotiated a tentative agreement with the government to receive compensation. After it agreed earlier this year to pay former PAC members for their services, the government apparently realized it would be impossible to refuse those who had suffered from their violence.

One remaining hurdle confronting the returnees is the gap between parents and children, many of whom grew up thinking of Mexico as home and often seem unaware of the violence their parents and grandparents lived through.

In 1995, the returnee community of Xamán, which is populated by Mam, Quiché, Kekchi, and other indigenous groups,

suffered the sort of attack not seen since the height of the war. On October 5, as the community was preparing festivities to celebrate the one-year anniversary of their return, a military patrol entered the village, which according to CEH “provoked an aggressive attitude among members of the community, to which the soldiers responded with criminal disproportion.” When the soldiers stopped firing their weapons, 11 people were dead and dozens of others injured.

One of those killed was 17-year-old Carlos Fernando Chop, the son of Anastasio Chop Garcia, a Quiché Indian who had fled to Mexico after losing much of his family in the early 1980s. When asked about the Xamán attack, Anastasio, a quiet, thoughtful man, paused a minute before briefly discussing the incident and then redirected the conversation. “My son was a schoolteacher, just as I was in Mexico in the refugee camp. Now I am back with the machete in the fields.”

I asked him about an experience I had a week earlier in the returnee community of La Quetzal, which had hosted an NGO environment conference in their tiny village carved out of the dense rain forest of the Peten. The activists were attempting to organize opposition to “Plan Puebla Panama,” a development initiative being pushed by Mexican President Vicente Fox that is ostensibly aimed at improving the region’s business and tourism infrastructure. The plan also envisions construction of a series of dams along the many rivers that stretch between Mexico and Guatemala. Because of La Quetzal’s proximity to one of those rivers, its existence could be threatened by the plan. As a result, conference organizers thought the village would be a perfect place for the meeting—never mind that the community is located miles of muddy road from nowhere and has only a single gas-powered generator.

The community, which was happy to host the conference, put on a cultural night, including live music, with a play by children and teenagers. It wasn’t a children’s play, but a reenactment of the massacre at Cuarto Pueblo, a brutal 1981 army attack on a village in Quiché that claimed the lives of more than 300 people. One group of children, the soldiers, attacked a second group, the villagers. It quickly turned violent: Some of the “soldiers” began pushing the “villagers” into the walls and onto the ground as others hacked the heads off baby dolls. The dozens of children watching laughed hysterically at the antics. The visitors were all visibly stunned.

When I asked Anastasio about it, he said that when his children complain about not having enough food and wanting to go back to Mexico, he explains to them what happened in the early 1980s. “I was just telling them the other day about *la violencia*. But they laugh at me and say I am crazy.” ✱