

Land Reform and Indigenous Rights in Guatemala

Report by Christina Polzot

In an October 10, 2002, visit to York, Alfredo Ché - the Mayan-Q'eqchi' leader of CNOG (the National Coordinating body of Guatemalan Campesino Organizations) - spoke of the efforts of indigenous peasants in rural Guatemala to overcome historic and continuing discrimination and injustice. He gave special attention to the latest institutional threat to their well-being: Plan Puebla Panama.

Alfredo commenced with a brief history of CNOG, a non-profit organization founded in 1993 to provide a united voice for all Guatemalan peasants (indigenous and mestizo) in the negotiations for peace then underway. Since the 1996 Peace Accords, CNOG's mandate has focused on issues of land access and related conflicts, as well as on issues of rural development, labor rights, demilitarization, and respect for human rights more broadly. For although the Accords officially brought Guatemala's 36-year civil war to an end, they failed to address many of the structural roots of the conflict - foremost among them the highly unequal distribution of land ownership. This, together with other factors, helps to explain why 80% of Guatemala's population currently lives in poverty or extreme poverty.

The government's failure to address peasant needs or to adequately respond to CNOG's requests, and its failure more generally to fulfill the promises of the Peace Accords with respect to land reform, has led Alfredo to believe that his government lacks the political will to resolve land issues in Guatemala. CNOG has responded to this political immobility through peaceful demonstrations and land occupations.

Land distribution in Guatemala is so uneven that peasants have felt driven to occupy privately- or government-owned plantations to draw attention to the need

for agrarian reform. There have been more than 54 land occupations in 2002 alone, some of which have been met with extreme violence on part of the police and alleged "landowners." Six indigenous leaders were assassinated in the Izabal area for their involvement in peaceful land occupations, and although CNOG has compelling evidence as to the identity of the culprits the government has refused to prosecute the accused.

It is important to note that the private owners of the plantations currently being occupied often do not have full, legal ownership rights over the land. In fact, many landowners legally own only small percentages of the total area of their plantations. The rest they simply claim as their own. Moreover, the national plantations (*fincas nacionales*) that have been occupied by peasant activists are lands that belong to the government, or lands that should have been—according to the Peace Accords—distributed to landless peasants to alleviate problems of resource access. This remains to be done.

Alfredo also addressed the misconception that landless peasants in the Petén region of Guatemala are to blame for the destruction of protected areas such as the Mayan Biosphere Reserve in Northern Guatemala. As the boundaries of the Reserve were drafted, Law 169 was formulated dictating that peasants living within the perimeter of the Reserve would be peacefully relocated elsewhere and compensated for their willingness to relocate. But as the Reserve became established, peasants were removed by violent means and were never compensated. Alfredo made reference to the fact that many foreign funds have entered the region over the years with the aim of conserving local biodiversity; what many international donors fail to realize is that local flora and fauna are not being successfully protected at all. The reason for this is not the occupation of lands by

poor, subsistence-oriented peasants practicing slash-and-burn agriculture, but instead is due to the government's issuing of wood-cutting concessions and the expansion of large cattle ranching operations within protected area limits. Alfredo highlighted the importance of protecting these natural resources, emphasizing that campesinos should not be held responsible for destroying them.

More recently CNOG has also played an active role in the growing movement to stop Plan Puebla Panama (PPP)—a mega-project aimed at creating a development corridor from the state of Puebla, Mexico, through the most southern Central American country of Panama. The PPP will create an elaborate infrastructure of ports, highways, railways, and mega-dams. Although PPP's proponents assure us that the project's outcomes will improve the quality of life for area's inhabitants, critics such as CNOG see it as an attempt to exploit precious natural resources while exacerbating the already elevated level of poverty in the area. Guatemalan peasants are particularly opposed to the planned construction - under PPP - of two hydroelectric dams along the Usumacinta River in the Petén region. It has been estimated that the construction of these dams will damage one quarter of the region, flooding 200 communities, 19 agricultural co-operatives, and various archaeological sites along the river. The question of where all of the displaced people will go has not been addressed by the projects' sponsor agencies, such as the Inter American Development Bank.

CNOG, and various indigenous communities in the area, were in the process of organising a large-scale protest against this hydroelectric project at the time of Alfredo's talk. The event was scheduled to take place Saturday October 12, 2002, and five CNOG regional offices were expected to partake. Protest strategies were to include closing off

entrances to major highways such as those connecting the Petén region to Mexico and Belize, as well as occupying oil refineries, the airport, and various government buildings. These strategies are similar to ones employed on August 21, 2002, to oppose a plan to build a highway connecting Mexico to Guatemala. The construction of the highway, funded in part by the World Bank, was designed to cut through and thus fragment the Mayan Biosphere Reserve. This protest, organised by CNOC, was successful in suspending the 8.5 billion-dollar funding for the project.

Alfredo concluded his presentation by noting that through agrarian reform in Guatemala will come development. As long as the government refuses to assume responsibility for inequitable land distribution, Guatemala will not develop and the discrimination and injustice faced by its large landless indigenous population will be perpetuated.



CNOC (the National Coordinating Body of Campesino Organizations) began working in 1993 in order to support dialog and negotiations in the peace process. CNOC's four main areas of work have generally included land issues, labor rights, demilitarization and respect for human rights to specifically support economic, social and political development in Guatemala.

CNOC is also part of the growing movement to stop Plan Puebla Panama, which would have damaging environmental, community, and economic impacts on Guatemala and the rest of Central America. They have participated in international strategy meetings and initiated outreach to indigenous communities, in order to create a stronger grassroots opposition to the plan.

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