

# CUARTO PUEBLO: WITNESS TO A MASSACRE

*Testimony of Juan Balthazar\* by Rachel Holder*

I had a dream on that Saturday night [the night before the massacre] that the Army would come to Cuarto Pueblo. The dream told me I had to go to into the town center the next day. I got up at 5:00 am on Sunday to go to the market because I wanted to buy some *chicle* to bind a wound on my daughter's arm.

While I was in the market place later in the morning a blue and white helicopter appeared from the direction of the Mexican border and circled overhead four times. Then somebody, who was cleaning the undergrowth on a hill near the Evangelical church, shouted "Let's get out of here!" They could see the soldiers coming.

The Army arrived first from the direction of the airstrip and entered the market place. Santos Velásquez, a military commissioner from Centro Maraviles, told everyone not to worry and said, "I'm a commissioner, it's OK. No one will get hurt." I was sitting three meters from him when he said this. I got up and went to the market place to see where the Army was coming from. Some soldiers were surrounding the evangelical church on the hill by the airstrip and concealing themselves in the cornfields so that they could stop people trying to escape.

The soldiers in the market place were shooting indiscriminately at men, women, and children. The lieutenant shouted at them not to kill the women, just the men. They killed the old people first. The soldiers said, "You can't enjoy old people, they're no good for anything."

Some women had managed to get out of the market place and were running. Their skirts had fallen off and they were naked, but no one was think-

ing of looking at them. They didn't escape because the Army came from the other direction and surrounded them.

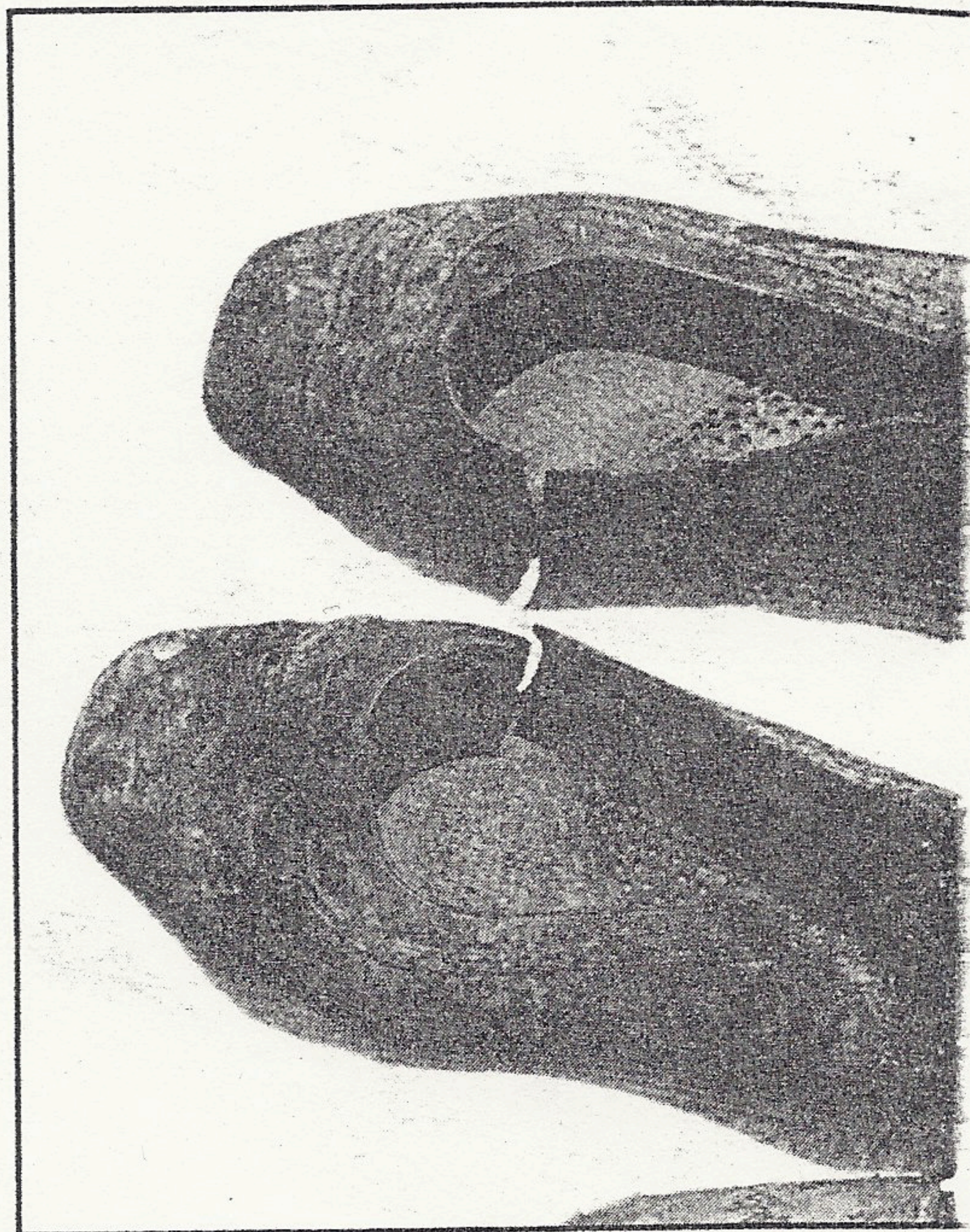
A soldier shot at me and the bullet went through my shirt but they didn't kill me. I threw myself on the ground and pretended to be dead. There was nowhere to hide because there was only tree cover on one side of the market place and the soldiers were standing around on all sides with their guns. They posted a soldier at every entrance.

I lay on my back in the market place all day. Soldiers were walking over me, and I could see their fierce faces. There were two or three dead people lying on either side of me, one of them the son of a woman I knew.

When the shooting started, about 15 women had stayed hidden in their shop in the cooperative. But the Army found them and took them to the school, where they locked them up. One of the women, Argentina, could speak Spanish. She wouldn't give her son to the Army and had him clasped to her chest, saying "First me, then my son." They took him away at night.

They had locked the women in the school. There were five soldiers for every two women. I heard the lieutenant tell them that in [the nearby community of] Pueblo Nuevo there would be a woman for every soldier, but in Cuarto Pueblo there were not enough. There were soldiers at every entrance to the school guarding them. They raped the women that night and every night after. I could hear the women crying, and saying, "We are going to die now. They killed María, and we are going die with her."

I hid under a trunk near the evangelical church. Ants were crawling all over and biting my face. I thought the



Army would go away at night and I could escape, but I had to stay there for three nights, with a guard soldier standing near me.

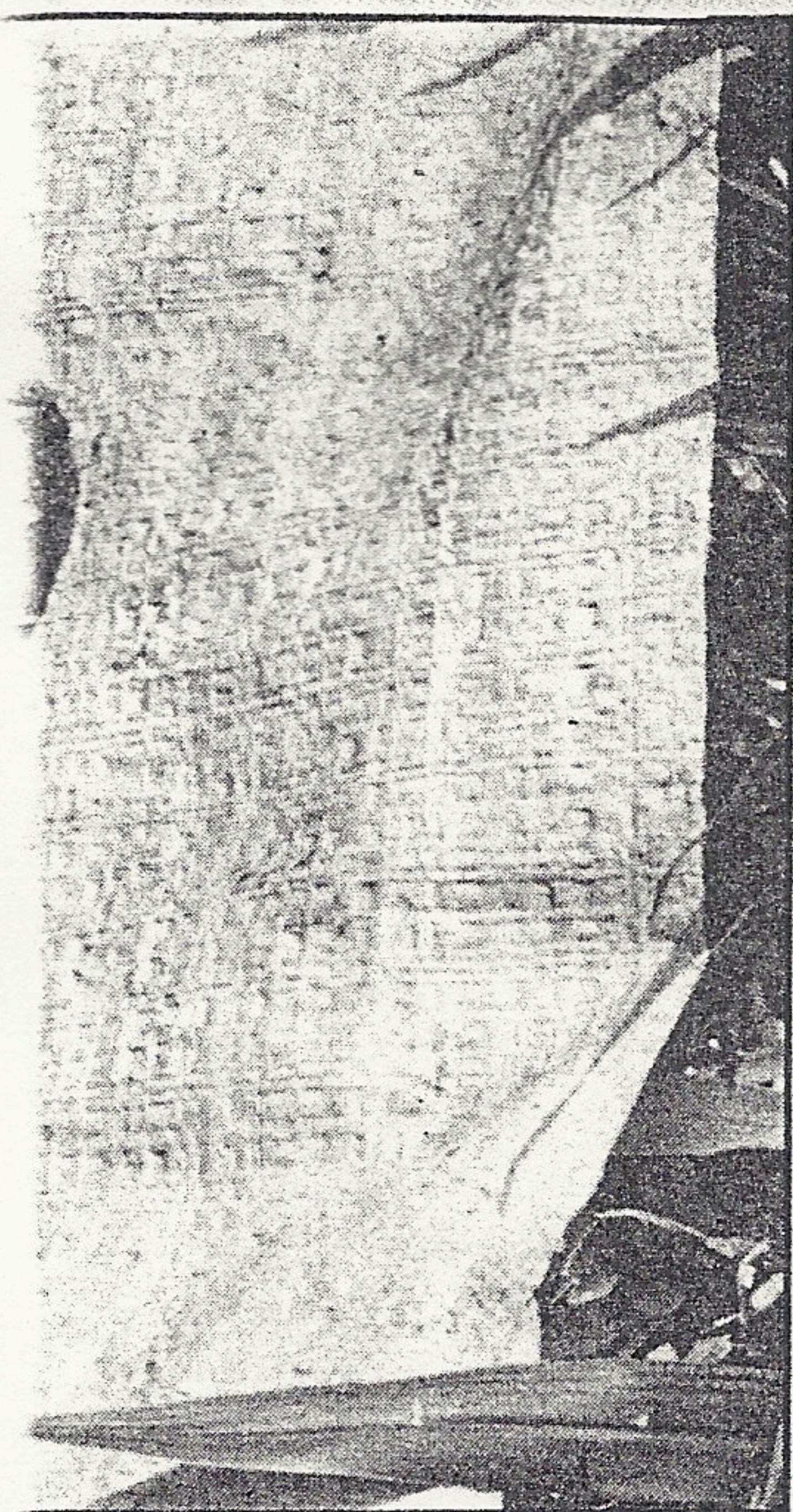
After the killing on Sunday, the Army ate biscuits from the cooperative. (There was a lot of good food in the cooperative.) They had not yet done anything with the dead. There were bodies strewn all around on the ground. They killed more than 300 people that day. At around 4:00 p.m. they began to collect all the bodies. They used a board for carrying them, and made a pile in the center of the market.

A helicopter arrived with gas from Playa Grande [military base] and they threw it over the bodies in the market place and also in the shop and the cardamom dryer. Then they brought sticks of wood and threw them on as well.

They said they were going to make sure the guerrillas burned. At 5:00 p.m. they started to burn everything; the fire in the market place was 20 meters high. I could smell the burning flesh. They also burnt people in the church.

Some of the children were still alive. They were crying. The soldiers taped their noses and mouths and doused them with gas. Then they threw them in the fire. They picked up babies by their legs and started to smash them on the





*Left: Shoes found during the Cuarto Pueblo exhumation.*

*Behind: Charred bone fragments from same site. Photos by Frida Berrigan.*

As I walked I was bitten by mosquitoes because I only had a short sleeved T-shirt on.

I went to the 'Centro Maravilla' and I slept in the lot that belonged to Don Victor. After that I went to the houses to see if I could find any people, but there was no one there. I stayed there for 4-5 days. Then I walked to Mexico to search for my family.

On the way to Mexico, I walked through Nueva Concepción. I thought I would be able to get corn from the field because I knew there was little corn in Mexico. I arrived there at 8:00 am. It was five or six days after their massacre, so the dogs and cats were eating the remains. I didn't find anyone alive.

When I got to Mexico, people saw me and asked what had happened because my face was black with bites from ants and mosquitoes. There wasn't any food or work in Mexico and I thought my family was dead. Then the Army and government of Mexico came and asked me the story of what had happened. They took me to a refugee camp. Six days later I found my family--I cried when I saw that they were alive.

I wasn't afraid to come back because I heard on the radio that the war was over and the Army is not going to kill anyone now. But I know the Army is still all around us. We're all still afraid.

We cannot forget what happened. If we just leave it, our children will never know. When Ríos Montt came into power, that is when people began to die. We have to be ready to stop it from happening again.

*Juan Balthazar is referred to in Ricardo Falla's Massacres in the Jungle as his principal witness. He returned to Cuarto Pueblo with the first group of returnees in May 1994. He lives on his own in a tiny hut in the settlement, without his wife or children--who all preferred to stay in Mexico. He gave this testimony during an interview in October 1994.*

concrete posts of the cardamom dryer. The soldiers didn't want to do that but they were forced to by the commander.

Later they killed a cow and each soldier had a chunk of meat. They cooked it in the fire.

On Monday and Tuesday they took cardamom, clothes, jars, machetes, money--everything from the cooperative. They emptied the warehouse and loaded up a plane to take it away. I could see them as they did it because I was up by the church and could see down onto the airstrip.

The soldiers asked the lieutenant if they could have the women. The lieutenant said, "On the 17th we're going to leave. We must kill all the women on the 16th; we can't take them with us. One soldier said he wanted to take the women with him because they were pretty. He was speaking *Kakchiquel*, but I could understand a bit. The lieutenant told him off for speaking in his indigenous language.

Finally, three days later, I took off my boots and held them in my teeth. And I crawled through the undergrowth. It was nighttime. Some of the soldiers heard me and asked each other what was making that noise. They thought I was an animal eating bananas. I arrived at the path near the evangelical church.

the dry season (October-April) because daily rains can make the work next to impossible. The duration of the dig is anywhere from a few days to, more likely, a few months.

The EAFG spends the entire day digging and sifting through dirt and rock, recovering and cataloguing bones, other bodily remains and evidence. Surviving family and community members are usually present, and continue to give important data as to the victims and the details of the massacre. In some cases, clothing, jewelry and other personal belongings found in the grave may be identified by a surviving relative.

It is very difficult to make a positive identification, even with extensive *ante mortem* information. However, some findings such as a personal identity card found in the grave will almost certainly lead to positive identification, as will specific dental characteristics. In the case of women who were pregnant at the time of death, the EAFG looks for fetal bones located over the womb area of a female skeleton.

### *Laboratory Analysis*

Once the dig is complete, the EAFG transports the bones, remains, and other evidence to a laboratory where they will then scientifically examine them. This step may last up to six months. In the case of a massacre after which the bodies were burned and there are few skeletons, the ashes and fragments are sent away for a more complicated procedure to analyze the DNA content of the remains. The EAFG then produces a report with a full scientific analysis of the forensic findings from the exhumation.

### *A Proper End*

Finally, the bones and remains are returned to the surviving family