



In a Q'eqchi' community referendum, the show of hands was strongly against the dam project, as it has been throughout the region.

Damned If They Do

A huge hydroelectric dam project in Guatemala threatens the livelihood of many Mayans, and some activists fear that it may threaten their lives as well, given the previous government's genocidal campaigns against these people

By Jason Boccaccio

At least 18 rural indigenous communities are set to be flooded if the Guatemalan government carries out its plans to construct the Xalalá hydroelectric dam in northern Guatemala. The dam would be the second largest in Guatemala and its reservoir would drown vital floodplains, which serve as fertile farmlands that yield crops of corn, beans and car-

damom. Dozens more communities would be affected as the now free-flowing rivers, which are vital to the region's subsistence farmers, would be curtailed to meet the needs of hydroelectric production. Aside from being a water source, the river is also used for fishing and is a key transportation route.

Studies show that 98 percent of the approximately 3,000 people who would be displaced by Xalalá are Q'eqchi' Mayas. The government has yet to outline any plan for the recompense and resettlement of displaced communities. Guatemala's National Electrification Institute (INDE) says the dam will provide clean, renewable energy for up to 2 million people and could generate as much as \$146 million

in annual profits. But the people who would be affected by the dam charge that a large percentage of electricity produced by it could be exported and may never reach the numerous communities in the region that are currently without electricity. One community activist said, "These are excluded communities. They don't have opportunities and it's not because they are poor, as we have been trained to think—they have land to farm, food to eat. The issue is they are not allowed to develop in their own way."

In April 2007, nearly 90 percent of participants in a community referendum in Ixcán opposed large dams and oil exploration. More recently, on October 29, 2010 at least 90 percent of people voting

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in the municipality of Uspantán also opposed such projects. Since 2005, 45 referendums have been held across Guatemala in which approximately 650,000 people have decried the dam project. Guatemala's indigenous communities believe that their collective voices should be heard, and international law supports them. United Nations human rights conventions like Convention No. 169 of the International Labour Organization (ILO) pertaining to indigenous peoples, states that governments "shall consult the peoples concerned, through appropriate procedures and in particular through their representative institutions, whenever consideration is being given to legislative or administrative measures which may affect them directly." It also mandates that "peoples concerned shall have the right to decide their own priorities for the process of development as it affects their lives... and the lands they occupy or otherwise use."

The Guatemalan government has ratified Convention No. 169, but claims that the referendums opposing the dam are not legally binding. As previously reported by *Indian Country Today*, James Anaya, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people visited Guatemala in June 2010 and declared that the current process of consulting affected communities is insufficient.

Not even bothering to hide its lack of interest in the referendums, INDE announced in June 2010 that it would accept bids to contract private companies that would conduct environmental and social-impact studies in the region, a precursor to construction.

In response, the people continue to organize and to explore ways to make their voices heard.

This is a battle much larger than three municipalities resisting the construction of one dam. It is a battle for life, nature and human dignity. Many people feel these mega-development projects are a new phase of the genocide that was perpetrated by the Guatemalan state during the country's 36-year civil war. The same communities who suffered the greatest human

rights violations in the war years are the communities now most threatened by mega-projects such as Xalalá. One community leader who took refuge in Mexico during the war and who is now actively involved in the opposition to Xalalá offered these words when asked why his community rejects the construction of the dam. "When we returned to Guatemala after the war, the government offered us a dignified peace and that is not the reality. So we still have to keep working towards that. In Guatemala, there isn't peace yet. The dam is another way of putting our lives at risk."

The violence culminated in the Rio Negro massacres in 1982, during which the army and the Civilian Self-Defense Patrols killed at least 444 people. Displaced people were promised new lands and an improved standard of living. Instead they were resettled under the watchful eye of the army into "Model Villages" with insufficient lands for farming. Over 25 years later, the affected communities are still struggling for just reparations and recognition of the atrocities they suffered. Many are still without electricity. Given this historical context, is it a stretch, then, to



A poster opposing the dam says: "Water for life, not for dams" in Spanish and Q'eqchi'.

A disturbing example of just how great a risk these projects can pose to indigenous Guatemalans can be found just upstream from the proposed Xalalá site. Between 1975 and 1983, approximately 3,400 Achí Mayas were displaced by the construction of the country's largest dam, the World Bank-funded Chixoy Dam. Affected communities were neither sufficiently informed nor consulted about the project. Military strong-arm evictions and full-scale massacres in the name of "development" paved the way for the construction of the Chixoy Dam. These abuses were justified by the government as counter-insurgency operations.

Some people who actively opposed the project disappeared or were killed.

question whether today's mega-projects are another phase in the genocide of the Maya people of Guatemala?

In a press release issued on September 30, 2010, community members stated, "Our communities want development that is dignified and just. We know the conditions in which our Achí brothers currently live. Thirty years later, the government has failed to repair the physical, psychological and material damages caused by the construction of the Chixoy Dam. Today they want to silence us once again with fear, intimidation, violence and control. We say to them, 'No, gentlemen, today we know what our rights are and there will not be another genocide provoked by the ambition of large corporations.'" 