



450 chairs are set up in Guatemala City on June 30, 2017 to commemorate the 45,000 people disappeared by the Guatemalan military. Credit: CPR Urbana.

Forced Disappearance: Resilience and Creativity in the Defense of Memory and Search for Justice

“The work of those who were disappeared was not limited to changing Guatemala; they wanted to change Central America, Latin America, and even the world. Their dream transcended nationality.” --Member of H.I.J.O.S. (Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice and Against Forgetting and Silence) collective

In Guatemala, many have come to think of historical memory as a “disputed territory.” Today, most of the people with political power deny or minimize the impact and extent of genocide in the country, carried out with direct support from the United States. At the same time, communities work tirelessly to sustain the memories of the 250,000 people massacred or forcibly disappeared by the Guatemalan military and police during the Internal Armed Conflict.

In the same way that ancestral lands and the human body have been targeted to oppress indigenous and *campesino* communities - not only in Guatemala, but globally - memory serves as both a site of violence *and* of resistance. In telling their stories, survivors directly challenge official narratives and reclaim a legacy of resistance to colonialism and oppression; speaking out poses a powerful threat to private and state elites who benefit from collective forgetting.

“If we were to only construct history from the point of view of pain and loss, I feel that in some way the counterinsurgency, and the rich who endorsed it, would have triumphed. I believe that reclaiming the revolutionary project of transformation and a critique of capitalism is in some way a huge victory over so much senseless death.” --Member of H.I.J.O.S.

With creativity, tenacity, and courage, survivors work daily to defend and restore collective memory of what happened during the conflict. Together, their work aims to guarantee that genocide never be repeated, while taking on the unfinished liberatory work of those who were taken by state violence.

Today, more than four years after the historic verdict that convicted former U.S.-backed military dictator Efraín Ríos Montt of genocide against the Ixil people, struggles for truth, justice, and memory continue – in courtrooms and in the daily lives of survivors. The 2013 verdict came after decades of courageous determination and has opened the door for new legal victories to be won. Every day, survivors, activists, lawyers, artists, healers, and educators fight for social justice and liberation in Guatemala. Historical memory runs through their work like a thread, connecting present-day movements with centuries of resilient struggle.

At NISGUA, we too see historical memory as a territory in dispute, for which we must struggle on many fronts. Our commitment to solidarity is a commitment to remembering, to learning from the past, and to celebrating and joining in resistance.

We take heart from the courage and creativity of survivors working daily to recuperate truth and memory and stand with our Guatemalan partners in their search for justice. As we defend territory in many forms – stolen indigenous land, our bodies, our identities – we hold historical memory as essential to our local movements for social justice and collective liberation.



Justice for the Disappeared

Not long ago, leaders who spoke out against state terror in Guatemala were known to disappear. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Guatemalan state targeted advocates of land reform, education, health care, and labor laws – to name a few – and took them from their homes and places of organizing, never to be seen or heard from again. The tactic, known as forced disappearance, failingly aimed to silence and destabilize movements that challenged U.S. imperialism and military dictatorships and championed indigenous and *campesino* self-determination.

When carried out systematically, as it was throughout Guatemala's internal armed conflict, forced disappearance is classified as a crime against humanity. Often implying detention, torture, and murder, forced disappearance was widespread during the conflict; truth commission findings estimate 45,000 people were forcibly disappeared by the Guatemalan military and police, 5,000 of whom were children. During this time, the Guatemalan military benefited from substantial economic and political support from the U.S., which openly supported even the most aggressive military governments. In addition, many of the military officials responsible for carrying out massacres and torture received U.S. military education at the School of the Americas, now the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC).

Photo: Faces of some of the people forcibly disappeared by the Guatemalan National Police during the conflict. In 2006, an illegal detention center was unearthed that housed millions of records meticulously kept by the police of the people that were disappeared. Many of those records are now being used as evidence to prosecute former members of the Guatemalan military.



The disappearance of family and community members had severe psychological and economic impacts, many of which are still felt today. Women were especially impacted by the disappearance of husbands and fathers. In most cases already the primary caregivers, they were then tasked with generating family income while searching for a missing loved one.

Women have long been at the forefront of struggles to locate disappeared family members and to bring the perpetrators to justice. Despite innumerable threats and direct attacks, families and organizations have worked for decades to find loved ones, honor their memories, and demand accountability. Through exhumations, burials, ceremonies, art, and historic trials, survivors honor and preserve memory of the disappeared.

Sites of resistance: Many strategies to weave memory



Seeking justice in the courts

Survivors and the human rights legal organizations that accompany them have made enormous gains prosecuting former members of the Guatemalan military for genocide and crimes against humanity. Emphasizing the importance of eyewitness testimonies, these emblematic cases have made the state's systematic targeting of communities a matter of public record, paving the way for more cases to go forward. Cases like Sepur Zarco, Dos Erres, the Ixil genocide case, Military Zone 21, and many others have followed the path laid out by indigenous survivors such as the members of the Association for Justice and Reconciliation (AJR), plaintiffs in the genocide cases.

Photo: An Ixil woman gives her testimony during the 2013 genocide trial against former dictator Ríos Montt. Credit: Roderico Y. Díaz.



Photo: Blanca Rosa Quiroa (FAMDEGUA) gets ready to join the annual June 30th counter-protest to the official Armed Forces Day.
Credit: James Rodríguez.

“The families of the disappeared don’t have weapons or power [like the military], only the truth that our family members were abruptly torn from our homes and we have spent years without hearing anything more about them.

Nonetheless, we maintain the hope that one day, we will know where they are, where the military left them.” -- Aura Elena Farfán, Executive Director of FAMDEGUA (Family Members of the Detained and Disappeared of Guatemala)



Photo: The body of Martina Rojas is returned to her family, 31 years after she was taken from her home of Río Negro by the military. Her remains were found by FAFG during an exhumation in Military Zone 21. Credit: CPR Urbana.

Finding those taken: exhumations and burials

Since 1995, organizations like the Forensic and Anthropology Association of Guatemala (FAFG) have carried out hundreds of exhumations, and have uncovered the remains of thousands of people killed by the Guatemalan military. With advancements in DNA testing, they continue to successfully match many of those bodies with family members, returning them for a dignified burial. Organizations like FAMDEGUA are intimately familiar with the agony that families feel after having a family member forcibly disappeared. Knowing what happened to their family members and providing a final resting place is of utmost importance for many in their search for healing and justice for their lost loved ones.



Memory in the streets: art, protest, theater

Members of Guatemalan civil society take to the streets to change the public narrative that celebrates the military. This year marked the 18th anniversary of the June 30th March for Memory and the 9th year it has taken place instead of the national military parade on Armed Forces Day. Carrying banners and signs, together with joint actions of street theater and music, they take to the streets to continue the liberatory work of their loved ones who were disappeared.

Photo: Grassroots social movements fill the streets, with banners made by H.I.J.O.S. collective depicting family members and activists disappeared by the military.



A focus on education at the House of Memory

The House of Memory, run by the Center for Human Rights Legal Action (CALDH), is a place where memory is recalled, revisited, contested, reconceptualized, and re-learned. It invites younger generations, in particular, to learn about colonization, trauma, resistance, and strength of peoples that inhabit these lands and calls on people to change their future.

Photo: The lens of feminism and women’s contributions to resistance are woven throughout the House of Memory; here March 8th, International Women’s Day, is celebrated.

In solidarity with survivors

Today, the forms of state repression faced by those working to defend their rights—to land, water, identity, and justice—bear striking resemblances to many of the tactics used against leaders and organizers in the past. With the support of neighbors like the U.S., the Guatemalan state continues to leverage enormous military and intelligence resources to target and criminalize social movement leaders who challenge elite interests and entrenched power structures by asserting community self-determination and dignity.

The role of the United States in creating and enabling the regimes that carried out a campaign of forced disappearance and terror is clear. Nonetheless, there is also opportunity for the international community to support the survivors in their quest to achieve justice and commemorate those that were disappeared.

For over 20 years, NISGUA has provided international accompaniment to survivors and other legal organizations who are receiving threats and attacks for their work fighting for truth in the disputed territory of memory. Through presence at trials, commemorations, and burials, international accompaniment can provide protection for survivors who often are threatened by military actors and their family members. By sharing the survivors' stories of their loved ones, accompaniers also support the process of preserving historical memory and stand in solidarity with survivor organizations.



Photo: A kite is raised during the November 1 festival in Sumpango, Sacatepequéz. On the Day of the Dead, families go to cemeteries to share a meal with their ancestors; some write messages to them on kites or depict other messages of social justice, indigenous identity, and respect for Mother Earth.

“We ask that nationally and internationally, people come to know what happened during the internal armed conflict. There are many who want to cover up the horrors that communities lived through. The fact that the international community is interested in accompanying and covering cases like Military Zone 21...we, the people who survived, feel strengthened that our stories have been heard.” -- Aura Elena Farfán, FAMDEGUA



Are you interested in responding to the call for international accompaniment? Join our growing network! We are now accepting applications for the next generation of accompaniers, for placements throughout 2018. A minimum commitment of six-months is required.

Application deadline: October 15, 2017.
Training: January 7-13, 2018 (Berkeley, CA).

Visit our nisgua.org for more information and details on how to apply.

Photo: An accompanier observes a community meeting in Huehuetenango.

A special note about photos:

One of the ways that people in Guatemala share memory and document the struggles advancing social justice is to take photographs - the content of which would not be nearly as powerful if they were not intimately involved in the fight to protect memory. We are grateful for the incredible photographers who are part of movements for social change and for their generosity in sharing their work with us. Visit cpr-urbana.blogspot.com, rodediaz.com, and mimundo.org for powerful photo essays depicting life and resistance in Guatemala.

About Us

The Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA) links people in the U.S. and Guatemala in the grassroots global struggle for justice, human dignity and respect for the Earth.