



## Searching for justice and lasting peace in Guatemala

### Delegation to Guatemala

The Service Committee has worked alongside Guatemalans in the struggle for peace, dignity and justice for nearly three decades. That is why UUSC organized a team of international election monitors to observe the Nov. 9, 2003 elections in the country. The team, which included a U.S. congressional aide, photographer, UUSC members and senior staff, observed the defeat of presidential candidate Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt at the ballot box.

The former military dictator was sidelined politically by coming in a distant third in the primary election. Gen. Ríos Montt's third place finish removed him from the December 2003 run-off election between the two highest vote-getters. His election defeat brought relief to the human rights community and the thousands of survivors of his early 1980s scorched earth policy. Activists and survivors, including UUSC partners, have accused the former dictator of genocide.

### Defeating a tyrant

The months prior to the elections brought even more intimidation and uncertainty to both the urban and rural population. This tension was exacerbated by the disputed presidential candidacy of Gen. Ríos Montt, who ran despite a constitu-



Photo by Cindy Karp/UUSC

*Voter turnout was high and the lines snaked around the central plaza at the November 2003 elections in Rabinal, Baja Verapaz.*

tional amendment that bans any candidate who has previously assumed office by violence.

Despite his defeat at the polls, Gen. Ríos Montt continues to head the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG), the ruling political party he founded and which has deep roots in the Guatemalan military. The FRG won the second highest number of representatives in the new Congress and the highest number of local municipal offices.

### Ending violence

At UUSC, we remain concerned about the number of former military and intelligence officers from a variety of political parties, not only the FRG, who won seats in the new

Congress. They represent a potential military block which could derail attempts to strengthen the fragile justice system, further implement the 1996 Peace Accords, and prosecute the perpetrators of crimes against humanity, genocide and other human rights violations.

As the peace accords have never been fully implemented, real peace remains elusive. In the past year,

**Although the 36-year civil war ended with the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996, justice has yet to arrive in Guatemala. An estimated 200,000 people – primarily indigenous – were killed during the long civil war.**

political violence, the remobilization of military and paramilitary units, threats against human rights workers and a fragile justice system have combined to provide what Guatemalan human rights leaders are calling the most significant challenge to a lasting peace since the war ended.

## Continuing our commitment

In 1974, UUSC began supporting program partners in Guatemala. Four years later, we conducted the first congressional delegation to El Salvador in what was to become the main focus of our human rights program in Central America.

Throughout the next decade, UUSC staff led 20 delegations to the region, allowing dozens of members of Congress to meet with a range of leaders and average citizens – from government and military leaders to opposition and rebel groups and from religious leaders to peasant farmers.

Delegation participants who traveled to Central America with UUSC went on to play leading roles in the U.S. Congress in working toward U.S. policies supportive of justice and peace in the region. Some projects that we supported decades ago continue now on their own initiative, highlighting the sustainability of our approach.

## Supporting human rights defenders

UUSC has continued its support for grassroots human rights programs in Guatemala, and we continue to work in coalition with other organizations in the United



*Francisco Miendez Pérez (left) of UUSC partner, the Civic Political Forum for Mayan Unity and Fraternity (EPUM), encourages fellow Mayans to vote responsibly.*

Yolanda, one of the leaders of Pro Mujer said to the UUSC election monitoring mission, “We used to say as long as men vote, why should we need to? Then we realized they haven’t done a very good job at it, so our voices and votes are needed. One of our weaknesses as an association is that we haven’t started to work with men.” Record turn out of women voters in their barrio in the November 2003 election was a sign of their success.

States and abroad to raise awareness about the deteriorating situation in Guatemala. With our members, we are pressing the U.S. government to take effective action to combat human rights abuses and impunity for human rights violators. Additionally, our members and supporters work with us for a lasting peace in Guatemala by hosting speakers or other educational events in their congregations or communities, and in a wide variety of other ways.

UUSC currently supports six partner organizations in Guatemala, which focus on three major issues: citizen participation, women’s rights and the rights of indigenous communities most affected by violence during the civil war.

## Expanding participation

Much work remains to ensure the political participation of traditionally oppressed groups, including indigenous people and women. UUSC believes that truly participatory democracy is the only way for Guatemala to move forward toward a lasting peace. Our partners are at the forefront of the movement to ensure that the rights of women and indigenous groups are properly represented in Guatemala by encouraging their active political participation. This includes involvement in local women’s groups, civic committees or other forms of political involvement.

UUSC supports two grassroots human rights organizations in this work, including the **Association Pro Mujer (For Women) Villa**

**Nueva**, an association founded and run entirely by the women who make up its membership in a large, low-income city outside of Guatemala City. We support Pro Mujer by providing funding and technical assistance for their women's citizen participation project, which struggles to bring low-income women into the political process.

Pro Mujer has already formed 40 women's groups which have developed a platform of action for their local government. During a UUSC staff visit in September 2003, over 100 women leaders interrogated the current mayor of their city on his lack of attention to the needs of women and pressured him to accept their platform as part of his campaign for re-election.

UUSC also supports the **Civic Political Forum for Mayan Unity and Fraternity (EPUM)**, a grassroots organization that promotes the inclusion of indigenous people in the political process. Given the high stakes of the 2003 elections and the candidacy of Gen. Ríos Montt, EPUM focused its efforts on a campaign for a conscientious vote with 13 different municipalities primarily in the western highlands of Guatemala.

EPUM encountered much cynicism and fear from indigenous people in rural areas around the elections and received countless reports of vote-buying and intimidation by political operatives, primarily of the FRG party. These reports – verified by multiple sources – highlight the need to disseminate accurate information about the secrecy of the vot-



Photo by Cindy Karp/UUSC

*UUSC's election monitoring delegation holds a "wanted" poster for Gen. Ríos Montt as part of the Association for Justice and Reconciliation's struggle for justice.*

ing process and to urge the entire eligible indigenous population to vote for conscientious candidates to improve the state of their communities. EPUM also works in coalition through national and regional meetings to unite the indigenous Mayan, Garifuna and Xinca communities with a common political agenda to fight for respect for a pluri-ethnic and multicultural society in Guatemala and the implementation of the peace accords.

### **Providing justice for massacre survivors**

The **Association for Justice and Reconciliation (AJR)** is made up of survivors of the 1981 and 1982 massacres, which took place under the military high commands of Gen. Ríos Montt and Romeo Lucas García. These survivors, who come from 22 different indigenous communities that suffered under the regimes, are prosecuting Gen. Ríos Montt and Lucas García for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. AJR also provides survivors and their families ways to

strengthen relationships between formerly isolated indigenous communities that all suffered during the conflict.

In the pending genocide cases, AJR is up against a weak justice system, a state which has not fully implemented the peace accords, threats of violence, open reorganization of the former paramilitary groups, and continued military interference in Guatemalan politics.

UUSC provides financial and technical support to AJR for their human rights work, including the legal struggle to end impunity for genocide, human rights education and training on the peace accords. AJR also holds community commemorations of the massacres and other means of preserving the memory of victims of the violence, including a nationwide quilt project.

UUSC also supports the **Maya Achi Association for the Integral Development of Victims of Violence (ADIVIMA)**. ADIVIMA

is an organization of primarily widows and orphans of the massacres in the Rabinal region during the Guatemalan civil war. ADIVIMA's focus includes exhumations of massacre sites, re-burials for the victims, construction of monuments in memory of those massacred during the civil war and legal support for victims. UUSC supports them in the long process of bringing to justice ex-paramilitary and military perpetrators of the massacre of more than 70 women and 107 children in Río Negro, Rabinal, Baja Verapaz in 1982.

Ironically, many of the monuments they have erected in memory of the massacre victims have been paid for, in part, by USAID funds, and its logo (the handshake with an American flag-like symbol in the background) appears on the monuments. The survivors are well aware that the U.S. government supported the government of Guatemala during the time when many of these massacres occurred but they need the funds.

ADIVIMA's administrator, Juan de Dios, addressed UUSC's election monitoring mission, "We are honored you have come this far to be with us at this important moment. The association was created before the peace accords to attempt to restore dignity to the victims of the violence. The first work we did was to locate clandestine cemeteries where the majority [99.8 percent]



*Teresa Alvarado Juárez is a Maya Achi widow and president of UUSC partner, the Maya Achi Association for the Integral Development of Victims of Violence (ADIVIMA).*

### Advocating for change

UUSC works in coalition with other organizations to support human rights in Guatemala. Initiatives include a campaign to end immunity for genocide and to support survivors of the massacres, and putting pressure on Guatemalan and U.S. officials to support human rights defenders. Our advocacy work also calls for full investigation of human rights violations in the country and urgent actions in support of partners' efforts for justice.

Get involved by joining UUSC's Guatemala Human Rights Defenders by contacting [programs@uusc.org](mailto:programs@uusc.org).

of the victims were indigenous people, mostly mothers and children."

### Empowering women

UUSC also supports the rights of marginalized women in Guatemala through partner organizations, such as **Promotion for Women's Rights (PRODEM)**. PRODEM identifies local indigenous women's organizations (often organized around revol-

ving credit or income-generating projects) in the indigenous Mayan Mam and Kiche communities in the Quetzaltenango area highlands. It then provides women's rights and leadership training to the organizations' leaders. UUSC support has also allowed PRODEM to add a bilingual Mam-Spanish facilitator in addition to their bilingual Kiche-Spanish trainer to their small staff.



# Unitarian Universalist Service Committee