

PBI volunteer accompanies sister  
Cecilia, legal representative of  
the Inter ecclesiastical Justice  
and peace commission



# Giving voice to the Earth 2008

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making space for peace

# Meet Eloyda Mejia

*Fighting to save herself, her community, and the lake that sustains them, Mejia calls for support. Nickel mining is due to resume this year.*

The communities that live around Lake Izabal, the largest of Guatemala's four lakes, named their campaign ASALI – the Association of Friends of Lake Izabal – in 2002, when they successfully saw off the Atlantic Petroleum Company by persuading the Guatemalan President to visit their beautiful lake and revoke the oil concession.

Over 1000 fishing families make their living from the 40 species of fish and other marine life on the lake. They are keen to develop eco tourism and solar power projects. However, ASALI is having to battle hard to preserve the local way of life and the lake that sustains it against the threats of pollution and dispossession posed by the reopening of nickel mining in the area. Meanwhile, ASALI's President, Eloyda Mejia, battles against violent threats to her safety and official prosecutions on trumped up charges.

As a result Mejia has been forced to move house three times, and not only to seek PBI protection, but since February last year, to take on particularly close accompaniment.

"The protection I have received from Peace Brigades International really saved my life," she says.

PBI's added protection came in the wake of forced evictions in lakeside El Estor on the order of the Guatemalan Nickel Company [CGN]. It was in the first months of last year that several Mayan Q'wqchi' communities were evicted from areas claimed by CGN. CGN is a subsidiary of Canadian-owned Skye Resources.

"The evictions were illegal, destructive and violent," said James Lambert, Director General of Latin American Bureau, DFAIT in an open letter to the Canadian government. "Close to 700 police and soldiers, many of whom were heavily armed, encircled the

communities as workers paid by the mining company destroyed people's homes. The army's involvement in internal policing is illegal under the 1996 Guatemalan Peace Accords."

Mejia has been at the forefront of exposing not only the human rights abuses the mining represents, but the environmental damage that the renewed mining operation would cause. A plant is planned by Skye Resources just three kilometres from the lake's edge. Lake water is due to be used to cool the plant's machinery and then be discharged back into the lake. Back in 1981, INCO – a mining company with cross ownership to Skye – abandoned its nickel mining operations in the area. It left behind a devastated and contaminated land where vegetation will not grow, which had once housed a Q'eqchi' community of 700 homes.

In September 2006, some 2,000 Q'eqchi' people supported by ASALI occupied proposed mine sites of CGN to protest against the denial of Mayan Q'wqchi' land rights, and the fact that those same lands had been given CGN who acted without consulting the communities affected. All of this is in violation of commitments given in the 1996 Peace Accords.

Unfortunately, the judicial system to which the indigenous people turn, can turn on them. Mejia has been fighting false charges of land usurpation since late 2006. She is sure that the prosecution is a form of official intimidation designed to stop her campaigning against CGN in El Estor.

That company proposes to restart operations on Lake Izabal this year. Mejia is determined to stop them.



## Double jeopardy

The UN Special Representative found that in Guatemala among human rights defenders, the main targets of attacks were those involved in the promotion of economic social and cultural rights of indigenous peoples, for example, trade unionists, peasant workers, members of indigenous people's organisations and environmental activists.

When it comes to land rights and natural resources many of the defenders come from indigenous populations and minority groups. In addition women are also vulnerable when defending land rights, in particular inheritance rights.

Defenders working on land rights often organise themselves into social movements. These movements and their activists have faced accusations of not being properly registered and therefore being illegal, of forming criminal gangs and the like.



# Defending the forest and its people from the palm

Colombia's Choco region is lucky. It has some of the world's richest and most biodiverse jungle. Its people are also lucky, they were formally granted the land as collective territories under the 1991 Colombian Constitution, law 70.

Or so you might think, until you realise that Colombia has the world's second largest population of internally displaced people. Second only to Sudan, Colombia has over three million internal refugees. Choco's people are among them. They were forcibly displaced ten years ago from the river basins of the Cacarica, Jiguamiando and Curvarado, by military & paramilitary operations, following this palm companies leveled the jungle, cut large channels to drain the earth of its moisture, and planted row upon row of palms for their oil.

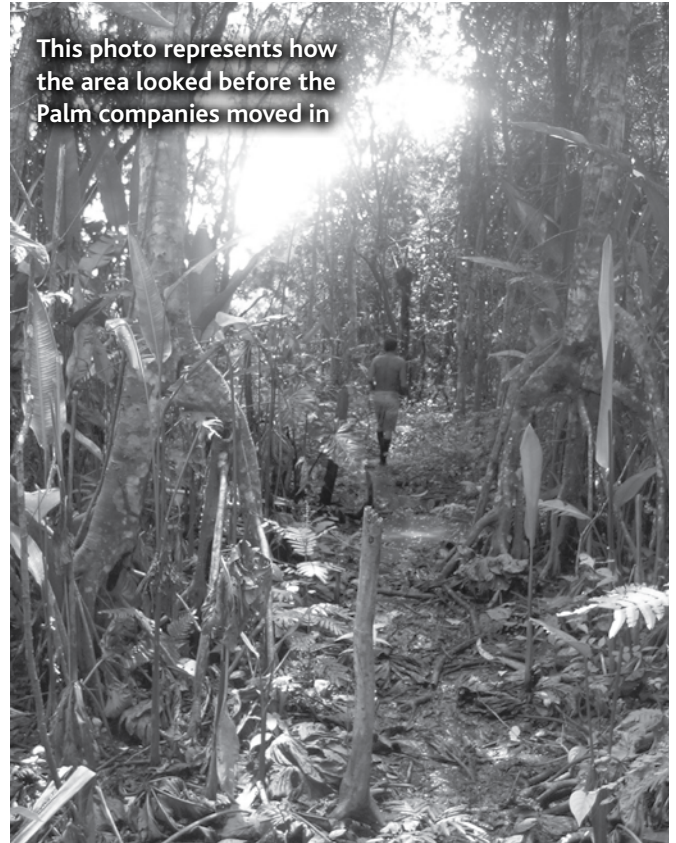
Choco's people have not given up. They maintain their claim to their land and to the jungle's wealth in plant and animal life. In this they are supported CIJP, the Inter-Church Commission of Justice and Peace. With CIJP's support some of Choco's dispossessed communities have set up innovative oases of hope, 'humanitarian zones'. Areas demarcated with a fence into which no armed forces – be they paramilitaries, military troops, or guerrillas – are allowed. Doing so however does not prevent threats to them and to their CIJP supporters.

Two of the CIJP activists are guests at PBI UK's Giving Voice to the Earth conference June 2008: Father Henry Ramirez Soler and Ana Maria Lozano. Both have had to seek help from PBI's volunteers who accompany them on their missions to the remote displaced communities. Outside the cities is where the CIJP activists are most at risk of being 'disappeared', harassed or detained.

In the meantime they are also subject to repeated spurious prosecutions and arrests for alleged connections to the rebel movement the FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia]. The cases are concocted on the basis of testimony which has already been found to be false, and declared so by Colombia's Attorney General's Office. However refusing to give up claims to land taken by the palm growers means that their meagre resources of money and hope are siphoned into defending these charges.

“ One day my father went out to fix a hole in one of our farm's fences. It was mid-afternoon. By 6pm he hadn't returned and it was dark and my mother was getting worried,' she says. 'We stayed up all night waiting for him. At 6am the next day the family got together. There were paramilitaries everywhere, all over the village - maybe 80 of them. Some turned up at our house and asked us for water.' The family sent out a search party which found him straight away. 'He was in the field where he had been mending the fence. He had seven stab wounds and they cut his throat from ear to ear. And they ripped his throat out.' Milvia's family's land is now covered in Urapalma palm trees. ”

*(The Human Tide The Real Migration Crisis, A Christian Aid Report 2007)*



This photo represents how the area looked before the Palm companies moved in



This photo is after the palm companies moved in. Just one tree left standing the rainforest levelled, with mile upon mile of palms. The community members no longer are able to identify their lands

Eloyda, a PBI volunteer



Peace Brigades International has been promoting nonviolence and protecting human rights since 1981 for more information on our work and how you can help please contact:

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