

## Back to the past? Re-militarisation of citizen security causes controversy

Since April this year the army has returned to being part of the daily scenario on the streets of Guatemala City and in the departments, with significantly high delinquency rates in the country. 2,400 soldiers have been turned over to the auspices of the National Civil Police (PNC) to participate in combined patrol forces in order to strengthen public security and confront the general insecurity<sup>1</sup>. Five months since the advent of the combined patrol forces, the violence rates have not decreased. Nevertheless, the President of the Republic, Oscar Berger, announced that they would continue with the action and anticipated that 1,200 soldiers will be absorbed by the PNC. In the same way, the Minister of Defence, Francisco Bermúdez, said that the measure should be extended for at least “two presidential periods”<sup>2</sup>.



Combined forces patrols during the Gay Pride March, June 2006. Photo: PBI

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More than one million people do not have appropriate housing in Guatemala City. Inhabitants of numerous settlements are still waiting for the legalisation of their land.

### The student and youth movement

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Throughout all societies youth has played, and still plays, an important role in the development of its systems. In this article we take a closer look at the Guatemalan youth movement.



### Interview with Erwin Orrego from FENVEMEGUA

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Erwin Orrego, member of a market vendor union, was kidnapped in July this year because of his union activities. PBI interviewed him to find out more about his experiences and his work.

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In November we move to a new house/office, where we look forward to welcoming you. Please take note of the new address:  
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# Back to the past? Re-militarisation of citizen security causes controversy

Army participation and its gradual absorption into citizen security activities has been criticised by different sectors of Guatemalan society and the international community as it violates the Peace Agreements of 1996 which state that *the mission of the Guatemalan army remains defined as the defence of the country's sovereignty and integrity of its territory*. Moreover, the external security, in charge of the army, and the internal, in charge of the police, were perceived as an integral concept which *includes the respect of people's rights, the multiethnic, pluricultural and multilingual character of the Guatemalan Nation, the country's economic development with social justice, social participation, the conciliation of interests and the strengthening of democratic institutionality*<sup>3</sup>.

Ten years after signing the Peace Agreements, civilian power has not been strengthened integrally. At the moment, for example, the weaknesses of the police, an institution created in the Agreements, reflect this situation. In its report *Security and Justice in*



Soldiers patrolling the 7th Avenue, Guatemala City, 2006. Photo: PBI

*Times of Peace* presented in April 2006, the Human Rights Ombudsman (PDH) points out that the PNC has not really been purged. The institution absorbed 60% of the former National Police, Estate Guard and Ambulant Military Police agents and almost all of the higher echelons of the military. Other challenges which the PNC confronts are the strengthening of the internal training and the purging of police agents involved in crime, acts of corruption and human rights violations<sup>4</sup>. In Iduvina Hernández's opinion, of Security and Democracy (SEDEM), including military agents in public security activities could weaken the structures of the PNC even more: *the more the army stays involved in public security, the harder it will be to regain civil control over security and ensure an effective strengthening process of the police*<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, the figures presented for the national budget 2007 do not coincide with the idea of strengthening the civil security institutions. In 2005 the designated budget for the Ministry of Defence decreased considerably but since then it has been growing again. It has been predicted that for 2007 it will increase by 14.7% whereas the Home Office budget will rise only 14.4% from 2006<sup>6</sup>. Considering the current situation of violence and insecurity the deficiencies inside the PNC not only lend credibility to a gradual re-militarisation but also to the proliferation of private security companies. Whilst the police force consists of 19,000 agents and the army of 15,000, the PDH estimates that there are 35,000 private agents in legal security companies and more than 50,000 which operate irregularly or without any type of authorisation<sup>7</sup>. Orlando Blanco of the Collective of Social Organisations (COS) points out the tendency of creating a new model

for the security forces in Guatemala *where the army disappears gradually in order to end up at the same level as the police and to form a National Guard commanded by militaries in charge not only of external but also of internal security (...)*<sup>8</sup>.

Security policies are subject to internal and external socio-political circumstances. The security agenda put in motion by the United States after the terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, for example, had important consequences all over the world. Hernández states that in countries like Guatemala it contributed to the strengthening of the existence of an army whose function after the armed conflict was not clear: *adopting the American security agenda the Guatemalan army found a way to survive by moving into citizen security*<sup>9</sup>. The list of threats established in that agenda includes gangs, organised crime, illegal migration, natural disasters, terrorism and drug trafficking. The Guatemalan Centre of Studies (CEG) points out that those "threats" *are not military problems and therefore do not require military solutions*<sup>10</sup>. The presence of gangs in Guatemala, for example, has been used by authorities to prove the need to create combined patrols in order to persecute and suppress them<sup>11</sup>.

During the last months the combined use of military and police forces has been a reality not only in urban but also in rural areas. On August 21<sup>st</sup> the combined forces raided Ixtahuacán Chiquito, Ixcán, a region greatly affected during the armed conflict. This action was criticised by large sectors of civil society for having been carried out, in their opinion, at the margin of legal parameters. Heavily armed military and police agents landed in the community

with seven helicopters, intimidating the people, entering the houses violently, and confiscating tools to excavate an archaeological site where they suspected arms to be hidden. On August 10<sup>th</sup>, in the Chailá estate of the same municipality, a similar operation took place<sup>12</sup>. The authorities responsible, the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office, issued confusing statements to the press about the objectives of the operation: some affirmed it was to search for arms, others to capture the drug-trafficker Otto Herrera, and still others that it formed part of a military simulation exercise<sup>13</sup>. Víctor Manuel de Sales, Member of Parliament, argues that economic interests are at stake: *What must be considered are the mega-projects which are planned for the Ixcán region and northern part of Huehuetenango: the Franja Transversal del Norte, the oil exploitation and sugar cane plantations for ethanol production, amongst others, in the interests of national and transnational companies*<sup>14</sup>.

Eight days after the military operation in Ixcán, the Presidency of the Republic declared a State of Emergency in five municipalities in the San Marcos department, restricting the right of demonstration, free locomotion and liberty of expression, because of a *constant climate of social confrontation and in order to attend and prevent the situation from getting worse (...)*<sup>15</sup>. Nevertheless, in practice, the operation, executed by 600 police agents and 300 soldiers, concluded in the eradication of poppy plantations (17.5 millions of plants according to government statements), the seizing of 12 weapons and the capture of 20 people<sup>16</sup>. At the end of the State of Emergency a permanent security force of 300 police agents was established in the municipalities concerned<sup>17</sup>. Blanco of the COS points out that the operation's objective was to demonstrate the fight against delinquency, as it was



Soldiers getting on a National Civil Police unit in Escuintla, 2006. Photo: PBI

programmed just days before a conference which took place in the United States over the certification of the countries which are fighting drug-trafficking, consumption and production world-wide<sup>18</sup>. Furthermore, Hernández thinks that the operations in Ixcán and San Marcos could actually be *tests which constitute a kind of military exercise in preparation for new incursions, reflecting State concern about a possible level of ingovernability because of Guatemala's precarious economic situation*<sup>19</sup>.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of September, the Presidency declared another State of Emergency for eight days in Fraijanes, a municipality close to the capital, in order to regain control over the Pavón prison. As in the previous operations, authorities used combined forces totalling 3,000 agents who entered to re-establish order in the jail, where drug-trafficking and other illegal operations were organised. Seven prisoners were killed and one was injured, and a police agent was also injured<sup>20</sup>. While large sectors of civil society applauded the State intervention in Pavón, human rights organisations voiced concern about the lack of observance of due procedures and the disproportionate

use of force. Moreover, they regretted the loss of lives and the use of the State of Emergency, which *represents a clear institutional weakness that unnecessarily limits citizens' liberties*<sup>21</sup>. Blanco remarks in this context that governmental measures like the State of Emergency are to some extent remnants of the armed conflict, which degrade citizens' rights and are being seized and exacerbated due to the existing levels of insecurity in the country<sup>22</sup>.

1 Prensa Libre, October 4, 2006.

2 Siglo XXI, September 30, 2006.

3 Agreement on the Strengthening of Civilian Power and on the Role of the Armed Forces in a Democratic Society, Mexico City, December 19, 1996.

4 PDH, *Seguridad y justicia en tiempos de paz*, 2006, p. 29-30.

5 Interview with Iduvina Hernández, October 13, 2006.

6 Prensa Libre, August 29, 2006.

7 PDH, *Seguridad y Justicia en Tiempos de Paz*, 2006, p. 33.

8 Interview with Orlando Blanco, August 27, 2006.

9 Interview with Iduvina Hernández, October 13, 2006.

10 CEG, Special Report: *Necesidad de una agenda de seguridad para Guatemala*, July 2006.

11 Several human rights organisations: *Informe al Señor Philip Alston, Relator de Ejecuciones Extradjudiciales de la ONU*, August 2006.

12 Marco Ramírez, mayor of the Ixcán Municipality and several civil society organisations: Press release, August 21, 2006.

13 Luis Solano, Inforpress Centro-americana 1670: *Error político en operativo antidrogas resucita fantasma del terror*, August 25, 2006.

14 Víctor Manuel Sales Ortiz, Comisión de la Paz y Desminado del Congreso de la República: *Operaciones militares en el Ixcán: ¿Vuelta al pasado de Represión?*, August 22, 2006.

15 Governmental Decree Number 1-2006, August 28, 2006.

16 Prensa Libre, September 4, 2006.

17 Al Día, September 13, 2006.

18 Interview with Orlando Blanco, October 27, 2006.

19 Interview with Iduvina Hernández, October 13, 2006.

20 Prensa Libre, September 25, 2006.

21 Several human rights organisations, Press release *Boletín*, September 26, 2006.

22 Interview with Orlando Blanco, October 27, 2006.

# Settlements in Guatemala City

A definition of "settlement" is: A particular place where a community of people lives<sup>1</sup>. However, in the context of human rights in Guatemala, it refers to a piece of land that has been occupied by settlers, quite often without legal rights.

**Article 105** of the **Guatemalan Republic's Constitution** talks about **Workers' Housing**, affirming that the State, through specific entities, will support the planning and construction of housing, establishing adequate financial systems that allow the functioning of different programmes, so that the workers can choose adequate housing which fulfill conditions of health regulations.

In **Article 119** it is further established as an **Obligation of the State** to promote, as a priority, the construction of affordable housing through adequate financial systems so that the largest possible number of Guatemalan families can enjoy home-ownership.

A ministry to attend to the annual housing demand has been created. The necessity for an estimated 114 thousand units was suggested by various experts who took part in the *Globalisation and Housing Politics in Guatemala Forum*, on May 25 this year. These experts agreed that due to the characteristics of Guatemala's housing demands there is a need for a specific administrative institution, apart from the Ministry of Communications, Infrastructure and Housing that currently exists. The shortage in the capital alone accounts for 47% of the approximately one million 21 thousand families without adequate housing<sup>2</sup>.

Amongst the poorest section of the population in Guatemala, according to the World Bank, the average number of people living per room is 4.8.

Roly Escobar, leader of the National Coordinating Body for Peoples in Marginalized Areas (CONAPAMG),



Basketball court in La Victoria. Photo: PBI

says that at present there are 570 illegal settlements in the capital and surrounding areas. Of these, seven settlements of 2,000 families, a total of approximately 10,000 people, are affiliated to CONAPAMG. Escobar added that *only 10% legally occupy the land where they live. Which means that 90% do not enjoy any legal rights. Land legislation says been converted into a political issue which changes with the change of government. The Housing Decree 25-2004 establishes that no land which has been illegally occupied after the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2003 can be legalised. According to this decree, the only possibility for land taken after this date is to wait to be evicted. In order to prove the date on which a plot of land was occupied, the inhabitants have developed certain forms of control; they compile lists of signatures and start forming the structure for an Auxiliary Municipal Council. Presumably all the settlements which can prove their existence from before the given date can aspire to the legalisation process<sup>3</sup>.*

The Development and Affordable Housing Unit (UDEVIPO) was created when the Housing Bank (BANVI) went into bankruptcy. When the Decree 25-04 - the Law of Adjudication and Real Estate - came into force, this allowed for the liquidation process

of BANVI to be completed, giving people credit. Those settlers who took occupation after the established date, according to the documentation held, then had to try and obtain subsidies from the Guatemalan Housing Fund (FOGUAVI) where they received up to Q15,000 (approx. US\$2,000). These families were offered alternative land, further away, but in built-up areas with guaranteed services. The only lands that are not legalised are those that are in high risk areas from the point of view of habitation. Escobar of CONAPAMG explains that UDEVIPO is not a fully legal entity because the legalising decree has never been passed and is still pending, therefore not allowing it to act. At least BANVI was able to help the settlers with credit. In his opinion, the legalising of plots of land is a political gambit. A small amount is legalised to give hope and encourage the settlers to vote for those who will grant them land rights in the next elections, although the truth is that nothing has been resolved.

## A recent eviction

*By judicial order, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October (2006), the National Civil Police evicted 50 families who had occupied the green area in 'Colonia Sakerti' zone 7. When the squatters realised that the police were there, they gathered together a group of children waving the national flag to obstruct the police. Although there were some tense moments, the squatters decided to leave the area peacefully a few hours later. At 9:20 a.m. Faber Moscoso, the public prosecutor, approved the eviction order and gave them one hour to leave.*

*However, the squatters asked the prosecutor to allow them to speak to the landlord of the grounds, as a condition for leaving the area. 'This is the only way we will leave' they warned. The prosecutor told them: 'There is a judge's order and we must respect it.'*

*At the ordained hour, the squatters hung up strips of plastic stamped with the national flag around their makeshift shelters. 'You have to respect the flag!' shouted one of the leaders. Ten minutes later a group of policemen from Police Station 14 arrived, armed with truncheons. In front of them a group of children sheltered behind a Guatemalan national flag shouting 'We want homes!' Behind them were several women with babies in their arms begging to be left in peace. 'We are in need; our children want somewhere to live' they said. Things calmed down a bit when 54 policemen armed with teargas bombs entered the arena. By 12:30 the police had taken down the first shelters. The squatters asked to be allowed to take the rest down themselves. By 5 p.m. just the vestiges of the squat remained<sup>4</sup>.*

The squatters' version, as related to some members of PBI, was as follows: The police arrived after the men had gone off looking for work, leaving mainly women and children. The police were hitting everybody, including a pregnant woman who miscarried the next day. They fired

teargas bombs and an old lady who lived next door was discovered dead in her bed with a wet towel over her face (these are used to reduce the effects of the teargas). According to them, the land was being used by a neighbour for storing and selling scrap metal. Because he was friends with the mayor he was able to get the eviction order.

In Guatemala, housing is recognised as a constitutional right. Moreover, Guatemala has signed and ratified existing international treaties such as the International Economic and Social Rights Pact, Article 11, which states that those States participating in this Pact recognise every person's rights to an adequate standard of living for him/herself and his/her family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and a continuous improvement in living conditions. The participating States will take appropriate measures to ensure the effectiveness of this right and recognise to this effect the essential importance of international co-operation founded on free consent<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, according to the abovementioned pact, every single

Guatemalan has this right and the State is obliged to take the necessary steps to comply, implementing short, medium and long-term housing policies, especially orientated towards the lowest-income sectors.

*Squatter settlements are a social problem closely linked to the overall housing problem in Guatemala City. They clearly manifest the need for housing and lack of attention paid to this area by the State. People in turn find themselves obliged to inhabit insalubrious and unsafe places, making these families highly vulnerable and susceptible to illness and death. From whatever point of view, be it economic, political, legal or social, these settlements cannot be eliminated. The passive or partial transference means a swift disintegration of the small successes that have been achieved throughout the years. It is practically impossible to change the present structure of the settlements. This is not to say that improvements such as the introduction of the basic services, such as drainage, electricity and drinking water, for a dignified life may not be implemented. Facilities can be provided so that the owners remodel and insure their homes, giving access to credit or subsidies to obtain materials and habitable housing, and especially promote employment policies so that people can generate incomes to allow a better standard of living<sup>6</sup>.*



Accompanying Roly Escobar, leader of CONAPAMG, in front of the community 5 de Noviembre. Photo: PBI

1 [omega.ilce.edu.mx:3000/sites/ciencia/volumen2/ciencia3/100/htm/sec\\_17.htm](http://omega.ilce.edu.mx:3000/sites/ciencia/volumen2/ciencia3/100/htm/sec_17.htm)

2 Prensa Libre, May 27, 2006.

3 Interview with Roly Escobar, CONAPAMG, November 19, 2006.

4 Prensa Libre, October 10, 2006.

5 [www.oacnudh.org.gt/](http://www.oacnudh.org.gt/), International Pact for Social and Economic Rights, 1966.

6 Brenda Gutiérrez, *El derecho humano a la vivienda en Guatemala*, May 28, 2004.

# The student and youth movement in Guatemala

Throughout the history of the world's different societies, the energy of young people has played a great role in the development of its systems and structures. They see with a fresh perspective what needs to be done in order to aspire to a better future, not only for themselves, but also for their grandchildren and future generations. In Guatemala, it is estimated that there are more than six million people under the age of 18<sup>1</sup>. In this article the voice of a variety of protagonists from different generations will be seen, looking for similarities between historic and current events so as to allow us to better understand the youth and student movement in Guatemala.

## Some history of the youth movement in Guatemala

From 1931 to 1944, a period better known as the 14 years of dictatorship<sup>2</sup>, President Jorge Ubico was in power. Alfonso 'Poncho' Bauer Paiz, a Guatemalan respected former statesman, remembers that before the Revolution of 1944, groups of young people were not allowed to meet on street corners. The police treated these people as delinquents because their act was considered a crime. There was no freedom of thought and Bauer Paiz remembers that *it was frequent practice to apply what was called the 'law of escape' if it was believed that someone was against the government. This consisted in capturing the person, accusing him of being subversive, saying that he'd tried to escape and that in turn they had had to shoot. These were extrajudicial executions*<sup>3</sup>. It was a period marked by limited individual rights.

Don Poncho observes that the 'regime' demanded that order be maintained. This meant not only forced military service, but also the militarisation of the National Central Institute for Boys' Secondary Education, the National Institute for Secondary Education and the National Central School for Boys<sup>4</sup>. The youth movement of this period openly opposed these practices of



Students in the demonstration on the 20th of October, Day of the Revolution. Photo: PBI

militarisation and repression and *who would have believed that Ubico, supported enormously by the United States, would fall, and our youth made it happen!* However, with the United States intervention in 1954, the youth movement was affected on a catastrophic level, with thousands of deaths during the following decades<sup>5</sup>. The book *3 Decades, 2 Generations*, presents a study of the repression suffered by the student movement in the 70s, 80s and 90s. The study states that *in a society such as the Guatemalan one, the historical resource of repression has become internalised in the subjectivity of the dominant social groups and classes. This subjective absorption of the use of repression as an inevitable or desirable fact ends up being considered a natural part of social life*<sup>6</sup>.

Mario Godínez, student leader at the University of San Carlos (USAC) during the 1980s, says that during this time *there was as much counterinsurgent doctrine as there was anti-communist. The State and the military and economic powers always thought that the university was a nest for communists and that something had to be done to control*

*us. One way of having this control was infiltrating to the innards of the university system*<sup>7</sup>. The participants of the movement held press conferences about the situation in the university and worked constantly against forced military recruitment. The students involved suffered constant vigilance. *A person you'd never seen before, leaning against a light post reading a newspaper, or couples kissing near where we would have meetings in areas where couples never met. There were a lot of contrived situations such as these and two or three times we found that police were inside the movement. They knew everything and various friends were killed entering or leaving their homes.*

In August 1989 they kidnapped several students. Godínez remembers that the Army took advantage of a conflict that existed inside the student movement, killing some, and then making out that the other group of students had done it. It was made public, with the support of the Rector and the State Home Office, that the conflict in the university was not between the students and the university, but between the students themselves. *When we saw all the students that had been kidnapped and killed, no-one*

*wanted to talk in public. There was no leadership. 14 people were either killed or kidnapped between August and September of 1989. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of September of the same year we received a death threat with a list of names, giving us dates to leave the country. We made a commitment not to leave, but quite a few did. Those that remained tried to reactivate the University Student Association (AEU) but it was too late*<sup>8</sup>.

## The current situation

One of the participants of the student movement at the USAC between 1975 and 1979 observes that *the student movement has a tradition of a political conscience that is maintained from leader to leader over the different generations. Because of the socio-political situation that characterises the Guatemalan society, there is always a questioning of the regime*<sup>9</sup>. One of the leaders of the new generation of the student movement is Calixto Morales of the National Guatemalan Student Organisation (ONEG). The ONEG is the only student organisation that focuses on secondary school education. Its objectives are an integral education reform, to rescue the secondary education student movement and to create and enlarge spaces where students from secondary education participate<sup>10</sup>. Morales explains that *students should be heard because they have an opinion, they have rights, they want to express themselves, they want to do things and need spaces to do them. The need for the organisation also has to do with the claims that students make regarding the defence of their human rights.*

Morales notes that since the organisation began carrying out bigger actions in July of this year such as a press conference and different mobilisations, various members of the ONEG have received threats. *They started with threatening calls and trying to steal our phones. One friend in Cobán received a death threat. They had information that we'd passed over the phone. They knew where we were going to have meetings, the time of the meetings, meeting points, at what time we were leaving our houses and there were several instances when*

*we identified them following some friends*<sup>11</sup>. Morales explains that he is still in the movement after all that has happened because participation is one of the few ways of destroying the fear that exists in Guatemalan society. He adds that if the young people do not participate in a society, the society is dead because it does not have a renovation of ideas and it does not have strength at its base. According to Bauer Paiz, *the oppression and the violence against the movement has continued, not as it was in the 80s, but it has been constant*<sup>12</sup>.

## What are the future challenges for the movement?

First, says Morales, *there is a need to construct the unity that the repression undid. Bauer Paiz's point of view of coincides with that of Morales when he explains that the movement looks for the same things today as it did yesterday, just that the youth today isn't united. The movement is fractured and the young people need to be united so that society respects their rights.* Morales also observes that *each organisation obviously has its particularities, and this means that what defines each one is different, but I believe they should head towards the same objective. Sometimes they head towards the same objective, but not always*<sup>13</sup>.

Godínez explains that *the conditions of the movement have changed. It*



Calixto Morales, student leader of the ONEG. Photo: PBI

*was different before, the repression beat you, the police, religion, but today's youth is more prone to other threats from the system. The constant exposure to publicity, the issue of television and video games and the ideology of violence is much more accessible*<sup>14</sup>. Morales also talks of a cultural change that weakens the student movement – the creation of 'anti-values', a term that refers, for example, to the strengthening of individualism and the promotion of selfishness. This cultural change means that people begin to see only what interests them personally, not what interests their neighbour<sup>15</sup>. At the same time, even with these cultural changes, it can be seen that the student movement in Guatemala continues to face the same problems today as it did yesterday and Bauer Paiz reminds us, talking of our present, that *the change has to come from the youth and this is how it's been in the history of Guatemala.*

1 Girón, S. Población Joven Domina, Bajo la Égida Paternalista, Inforpress, No. 1676, October 6, 2006, p. 10.

2 Contreras, J. D. Breve Historia de Guatemala, Editorial Piedra Santa, El Salvador, 1998, p. 123.

3 Interview with Alfonso Bauer Paiz, October 23, 2006, Guatemala City.

4 Instituto Nacional Central de Varones, el Instituto Nacional de Bachillerato and la Escuela Normal (Central para Varones). All three are state schools. The first two cater for children aged approx. 15-18, the latter for all ages.

5 Ibidem.

6 Barrillas, B., Enríquez, C. and Taracena, A. 3 Décadas, 2 Generaciones, Editorial Serviprensa, Guatemala, 2000, p. 96.

7 Interview with Mario Godínez, October 24, 2006, Guatemala City.

8 Ibidem.

9 Barrillas, B., Enríquez, C. and Taracena, A. 3 Décadas, 2 Generaciones, Editorial Serviprensa, Guatemala, 2000, p. 17.

10 Interview with Calixto Morales, October 25, 2006, Guatemala City.

11 Ibidem.

12 Cit. Interview.

13 Cit. Interviews with Calixto Morales y Don 'Poncho'.

14 Cit. Interview.

15 Cit. Interview.

# Interview with Erwin Orrego from the National Front of Market and Informal Economy Vendors of Guatemala (FENVEMEGUA)

## How did the Guatemalan National Front of Market and Informal Economy Vendors, FENVEMEGUA, start?

While I was working, selling in some of the markets in the capital I met a friend who said that there were a lot of other market vendors who would like to form an association. In those days, before the signing of the Peace Agreements, we had nowhere to go. I approached the United Union and Popular Action (UASP) and we started to work with every aspect of the informal economy. At that time we founded FEMEGUA, which was the Emergency Front of Guatemalan Markets, later on the name was changed because we thought that the vendors were not included in the name, which is why in the end we settled for Guatemalan National Front of Market and Informal Economy Vendors, FENVEMEGUA. The formation of this front was expanding even though we did not have any legal rights or status. The work took many forms: we were attending speeches and there were some workshops, there was also some training for leaders of the front. That is how the National Market and Informal Economy Vendors Front, FENVEMEGUA, started.

## What kind of work do you do?

It turns out that our work has been to defend the people of the informal economy from the different types of aggression they suffer, to defend their rights. Every human being has the right to work and this is an obligation and a moral duty. To sell in the streets, to offer products in the markets, to provide this service is a contribution to the Guatemalan economy. This is what we fight for, that these rights be respected.



Reconstruction of the kidnapping with an officer of the Human Rights Ombudsman's office. Photo: PBI

## What problems are the market and the informal economy vendors facing in Guatemala?

During the last administration there was fierce confrontation, even with weapons in peace times, because it was seen to be propitious to sell the site of the Terminal Market to one of the multinationals in Guatemala, to install a more complex and "formal" market system on this site. The intention was to clear the market from the Terminal, completely, because it was already sold. A privatisation bill was proposed for all the markets; as a market association we started lobbying Congress to modify the local government code and make it clear that the markets could not be privatised, that they were recognised as a national heritage. Fortunately there has not been an overall privatisation, but there has been some kind of privatisation. The issue is that they want the informal

economy to disappear; this is in the context of the ratification of the CAFTA (Central American Free Trade Agreement) by the president and the pressure exerted by the United States of America so that Guatemala enters these kind of activities. Guatemala has not got a sufficiently strong economy to opt for this kind of treaty, what it has most of is cheap labour. In Guatemala there are no economic safeguards, no labour safeguards, there are no safeguards to support these kind of treaties and make progress.

There is also the scenario in which settlements are going on at the political level. The Peace Agreements have not been taken as a State or a government policy. In this context there are problems because the types of policies favoured oblige the vendors to enter into this kind of informal economy, and be suppressed by every government entity.

## How do you see the current situation of the sector?

Basically, in the markets we are having to pay over the odds for floor-place for our stalls. We have an agreement that the price is 50 cents per square metre and they have been charging up to five quetzals per square metre of floor space. Vendors who fall behind in their payments are charged up to four times the original total quantity.

In relation to charges, there are also vendors selling on the buses; they have permission to do this kind of work from the relevant government department, but they have been charged exorbitant amounts.

There are vendors who are up to date with their municipal tax payments who are evicted, supposedly because of local government policies and re-arrangement of the infrastructure. That is a lie, because afterwards they allow someone else in, who pays more on the spot. There are severe evictions, as in the case of the vendors of zone 1 in front of San Sebastian park. There is also the case of the vendors in the Archway, they were evicted by the National Civil Police, they were beaten up, some of them had their merchandise stolen. The case of the vendors of zone 3, they were being evicted: one of the vendors was hit by a plastic bullet which pierced his biceps, and now that tendon does not work properly anymore, he no longer has adequate arm mobility. The vendors of zone 3 do not occupy a physical structural market space, but they rent different house-fronts to exercise this right we have for free trade, because in Guatemala supposedly we have free trade, but that is only for people with sufficient resources.

## How has your personal life been affected by the work your in FENVEMEGUA?

I have really been quite affected. In 2003 I was kidnapped and held for two or three days. Because of this strong aggression, I lost complete control

over my body, control over my mind and over everything going on around me. Since then I have not experienced normal life as any ordinary person who goes to and from work and nothing happens to them. One or two days may go by, but there is always somebody, or more than one person, following me, somebody letting me know that they are watching me. Only at the beginning of this year was I able to reintegrate into the Market Front and my various activities with other organisations again.

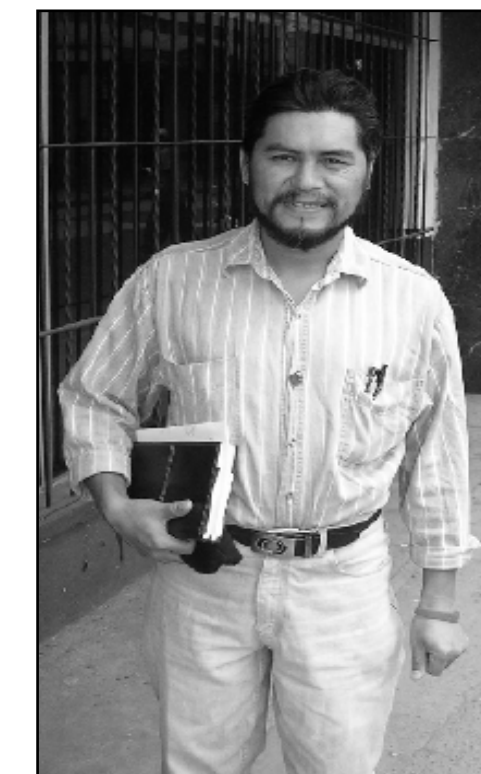
On the 27<sup>th</sup> of July this year, 2006, I was the target of a similar aggression as the one suffered in 2003, I was kidnapped for several hours. Only this time fortunately I was being monitored and I showed up in Boca del Monte maybe beaten up, maybe clumsy, maybe even like a fool, but anyway here I am. I can no longer leave my house freely, only with some kind of accompaniment; I can not get a respectable job because of my personal situation of insecurity. This has affected my family life somewhat; my personal life. I can no longer give my children what I want to give them; I can no longer give them what they ask for. Also my economic situation has been affected up to the point where we often have to skip meals. I have been affected in many ways, but in spite of this I believe that the struggle must go on, that it is for our children, our grandchildren, so that my grandchildren and my great-grandchildren will have a better Guatemala.

My case is a strong case not only for myself but also for my comrades in the social movement. It has affected not only my personal life but also the activities we had with all those social activists.

## What solutions are there for the problems the vendors are facing?

The only and basic solution is to give the people of the markets some training, not only should they have

academic training, but also a moral, cultural and political one. Without these four things there can not be an integral development. Apart from this there must be an open and above board dialogue table. I have always been very insistent that in this type of activity, there should not be any underhand dealings, because they affect the process of dialogue. When there is a dialogue the same people contribute to the solutions. The Market Front has given basic propositions to local government: there should be nurseries; there should be a school in each and every one of the markets. Education in Guatemala is part of the solution, not only for the market conflicts or for the informal economy as such, but for the conflicts of all social activists. I believe this would be basically the beginning of a transformation for a better Guatemala.



Erwin Orrego. Photo PBI

# PBI in Guatemala: An update on the projects's activities

## Team Work

PBI's team work in the field has been following due course over the last few months. We have been going on accompaniments and observations and also attending regular meetings with Guatemalan organisations and authorities as well as with members of the international community.

Due to an increase in the size of the team, which now consists of 10 members, we began looking for a new house. Finally, after an exhaustive search, we found a new house and moved in during November. Our new home is more spacious and very well located close to the centre.



ASALI during an awareness workshop in the community of Polígono. Photo: PBI

## Activation of our Support Network for CONAPAMG

The most significant event for the project over the last few months was the activation of both our internal and external Support Networks. The activation came after a series of harassments received by the National Coordinator of Inhabitants of Marginal Areas (CONAPAMG), one of the organisations we have accompanied since July 2004. The main reason for the activation was the serious threats received by Roly Escobar the Coordinator of CONAPAMG. The team's response included intensifying the accompaniment to the Coordinator and also holding a number of meetings with various Guatemalan authorities and the diplomatic corps. Outside of Guatemala, PBI country groups in Europe and North America sent out letters and met civil servants from their respective ministries of External Affairs and parliamentarians.

## Observation of Demonstrations

We have also observed and attended various demonstrations both in the city and in the department of Alta Verapaz, especially during the month of October. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of October we observed the demonstration that took place on Indigenous, Campesino, Union, and Popular Resistance Day. Amongst other

activities, we were present on the Day of the Revolution, the 20<sup>th</sup> of October. In both cases we noted that there was a large presence of the various Guatemalan popular and civil society sectors.

## Accompaniments – ASALI

We have continued our accompaniment with Friends of Lake Izabal, (ASALI), who have been very busy working especially in issues surrounding mining operations, hydroelectric plants and natural resources in general. The reason for their focus on these issues stems from the conflict that exists between communities and the government for the lack of consultation for both proposed and established mega projects in that region.

## FENVEMEGUA

We have seen the intensity of our accompaniment with Erwin Orrego increase over the last few months due to the strong surveillance which Erwin is experiencing. Our accompaniment is concentrated mostly on the public activities related to his current work as active member of the Guatemalan National Front of Market and Informal

Economy Vendors (FENVEMEGUA). FENVEMEGUA is a national union which is comprised of informal sector workers who are struggling for their rights against the Municipality of Guatemala City.

## Free Time

Of course it is not all work and no play; we also try to find time and spaces where we, as a team, can share free time all together. Most of the time we try and enjoy the beautiful landscape and attractions that Guatemala offers. During the last three months we were able to see the lava of the Pacaya Volcano and walk the trails of Alux. We were even able to take advantage of a full weekend in Mariscos, on Lake Izabal where we did some team building and also took some time to relax. Moreover, it was a time to try and improve how we work. In the end it was an amazing weekend that allowed us to unwind from the day to day work.

## PBI's Guatemala Project

The Guatemala Project's work does not only take place in Guatemala. Outside the country borders we have the dedicated Project Committee and

## PBI accompaniments

PBI accompaniments are undertaken after studying petitions from organisations that are concerned with one or more of the following areas: fight against impunity, land rights and the effects of globalisation on human rights. Over the past months we have accompanied the following organisations:

- **The Coordinator of Widows of Guatemala, CONAVIGUA.** We carry out regular visits to their office and also accompany during exhumations in hidden cemeteries and inhumations of the corpses found.
- **The Union of Campesino Organisations of the Verapaces, UVOC.** We accompany various leaders of the UVOC, in particular **Carlos Morales**, since the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 2005, during activities in the Verapaces and other parts of the country.
- **The Guatemalan Association of Indigenous Mayors and Authorities, AGAAI, and the Mayan Foundation, FUNDAMAYA.** We have periodically accompanied organisation leader **Carlos Guarquez** since January 2005.
- **The Guatemalan National Front of Market and Informal Economy Vendors, FENVEMEGUA.** We accompany **Erwin Estuardo Orrego Borrayo** since his kidnapping on the 27<sup>th</sup> of July 2006.
- **The MadreSelva Collective.** We carry out regular visits to their office and accompany during their activities throughout the country where members are seen to be at greater risk.
- **The Association of Friends of Lake Izabal (ASALI).** We continue to accompany the association's legal representative, **Eloyda Mejía**, as well as other members of the organisation, during their activities in El Estor, Izabal.
- **The Movement of Campesino Workers, MTC.** We started accompanying the organisation in November 2005. We carry out regular visits to their headquarters in San Marcos and accompany some of the movement's leaders who have received threats because of their work.
- **Organisation to Support an Integrated Sexuality to Confront AIDS, OASIS.** Since March 2006 we accompany the organisation with regular visits to their office. In particular we accompany **Zulma**, witness to the murder of a transgender person, a crime allegedly committed by members of the National Civil Police.
- **Women's Sector.** In June 2006 we began to accompany members of the organisation working in the capital after they were victims of two unlawful entries into their office. Since then we have made regular visits to their workplace and also accompanied them during activities outside of their office.
- **The National Coordination of Residents of Marginal Areas in Guatemala, CONAPAMG.** We have intensified the accompaniment of the coordinator **Roly Escobar** after the threats received on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September, and for intimidations and constant vigilance suffered by him and the organisation.

the Project Coordination Office who are always aware of what is happening with the team and project. They also help and support the team by contributing with their analysis and experience to the existing accompaniment work being done by the team. Furthermore, they also support the team financially and politically through their awareness-raising campaigns and diffusion of information, all the while coordinating internationally with other parts of the organisation (e.g. the International Office, or Country Groups). Lastly, it is important that we mention the hundreds of volunteers in the Country Groups of PBI who also collaborate with and support the Guatemala Project. This volunteerism is vital to PBI if hopes to continue "opening spaces for peace".

**Canadian Delegation Visits Guatemala**  
PBI-Canada along with PBI Guatemala organised a delegation which arrived last August. The delegation was made up

of union members, PBI supporters and members of PBI. The objectives of the visit were to: a) strengthen the solidarity for Guatemala and the Support Network; b) increase awareness regarding the present situation in Guatemala and the connections that exist with Canada – especially regarding Canadian social movements and investments and; c) to learn about the PBI in Guatemala and the reality lived by human rights defenders in the country. The delegates had the opportunity to meet with organisations that we accompany, other civil society representatives, and visit Lake Izabal.

## PBI Celebrates its 25th Anniversary

On August 11<sup>th</sup> PBI Guatemala celebrated the **25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of PBI** as an organisation, with the participation of the Project's consultant **María Gabriela Serra**, ex-minister and writer **Alfonso Bauer Paiz** and **Katia Aebly**, one of the volunteers on the team. The whole team participated in



25th anniversary celebration. Photo PBI

the organisation of the event down to the last detail. There was an exhibition on the 25 years of PBI, refreshments, live music, and a great ambiance which allowed people who were accompanied by PBI to reunite, for the first time in years for many. It was an incredible and very moving celebration.

### Mission

To improve the human rights situation in Guatemala and contribute to the democratising process of the country through an international presence that works to maintain the political space for human rights defenders, lawyers, union members, campesino and Indigenous organisations and civil society groups that are suffering repression due to their work in defence of human rights.

### Objectives

1. To provide an international presence that contributes to the opening and protection of the political space of Guatemalan organisations that are working to end impunity for human rights abuses; and to bring about national reconciliation and compensation to the victims of human rights violations as well as the fulfillment of the commitments of the Peace Accords.

2. To keep the international community informed of the human rights situation in Guatemala through the regular communication of information, as well as frequent contact with international authorities and the diplomatic community both within and outside the country.

3. To ensure that the Guatemalan Government is informed of the attention and concern of the international community to the human rights situation in the country through the regular communication of information and frequent contact with national authorities.

4. To share with Guatemalan organisations the experience and pedagogical tools that help reach the general objective of PBI's project.

### Peace Brigades International

PBI is an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) which protects human rights and promotes nonviolent transformation of conflicts.

At the request of threatened social organisations it provides international accompaniment and observation. The presence of international volunteers backed by a support network helps to deter violence.

In this way, PBI creates space for local activists to work for social justice and human rights.

### PBI in Guatemala

PBI maintained a team of volunteers in Guatemala from 1983 to 1999. During those years it carried out accompaniment work with human rights organisations, trade unions, indigenous, and campesino organisations, refugees, and religious

organisations. In 1999, after an evaluation process it was decided that, as the country had greatly advanced in the opening of space for the work of human rights organisations, the project could close. Nevertheless, PBI remained attentive to the situation in Guatemala through a follow-up committee.

In mid-2000, PBI began receiving a number of requests for international accompaniment. As a result, an investigation was carried out in the field which revealed a deterioration and in some cases a closing of the space for human rights defenders. In April of 2002 PBI decided to reopen the Guatemala Project to carry out international accompaniment and observation in coordination with other international accompaniment NGOs. The new PBI office was opened in April 2003.



The whole Guatemala team celebrating the arrival of the 2 new members. Photo: PBI.

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