
Guatemala: A dam and the massacre of 400 people

Forced resettlement of local people living in the area where dams are built usually results in human rights abuses. One of the most terrible examples is that of the Chixoy hydroelectric dam, which was built during the military dictatorship in Guatemala. The project resulted in the massacre of more than 400 Maya Achi people, mostly from the community of Río Negro, one of the villages to be flooded by the dam.

The violence against the indigenous people began in 1980, when military police came to Río Negro and shot seven people. In July that year, two representatives from the village agreed to go to a meeting requested by the National Institute for Electrification (INDE). They took with them the village's only documentation of resettlement and cash payment agreements. The mutilated bodies of the two men were found a week later. The resettlement documents were never recovered.

In February 1982, 73 men and women were ordered by the local military commander to report to Xoxoc, a village upstream from the reservoir which had a history of land conflicts and hostility with Río Negro. Only one woman returned to Río Negro. The rest were raped, tortured, then murdered by the Xoxoc Civil Defense Patrol, one of the notorious paramilitary units used by the state as death squads.

But the worse was yet to come. On 13th March, the military rounded up all the women and children and marched them to a hill above the village and proceeded to torture and murder 70 women and 107 children. Witness for Peace produced in 1995 a report based on interviews with survivors, where the terrible way in which these people were murdered is described in detail. Two months later a further 82 people were murdered.

Responsibility over this tragedy is shared by all those institutions and companies which, being aware of the brutality of the Guatemalan regime, collaborated in building this 300 megawatts dam. The Interamerican Development Bank and the World Bank provided more than 300 million dollars in loans. The Italian government provided bilateral aid and export-credit guarantees. The consortium that planned, designed and supervised construction for the dam included Lahmeyer International (Germany), Motor Columbus (Switzerland) and International Engineering Company (USA). Cogefar (Italy) and Swissboring (Switzerland) were the companies that actually built the dam. Hochtief (Germany) was the contractor for the repair work on the tunnels.

In spite of having been instrumental in building a dam which resulted in this tragedy, none of the above are willing to admit their responsibility. After an internal investigation, the World Bank acknowledged that a massacre had occurred, but admitted no responsibility. The companies involved in Chixoy have always denied knowledge of the massacres, but local eye-witnesses say that a Cogefar lorry was used by the army during the massacres and that kidnapped women were taken to the dam building site, from where they were carried away by helicopter. So many must have known. But even if they didn't notice anything: didn't they find strange that 400 people suddenly disappeared from the dam site?

The survivors of Río Negro have sought redress in national and international arenas. Material and spiritual reparations are still awaited by those who survived, but no compensation is possible for the cultural losses, violence, intimidation, loss of livelihood and psychological damage suffered by the affected communities.

Article based on information from: "Dams Incorporated. The Record of Twelve European Dam Building Companies", by Chris Lang, Nick Hildyard, Kate Geary and Matthew Grainger. Published by Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, February 2000; "A People Dammed." The Impact of the World Bank Chixoy Hydroelectric Project in Guatemala", Witness for Peace, 1995