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COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
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QUESTION OF THE VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS
IN ANY PART OF THE WORLD, WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO COLONIAL
AND OTHER DEPENDENT COUNTRIES AND TERRITORIES

Situation of human rights in Guatemala

Note by the Secretary-General

The Commission on Human Rights in resolution 33 (XXXVII) of 11 March 1981 requested the Secretary-General to provide it with, inter alia, "all information collected on the human rights situation in that country".

The Secretary-General presented to the Commission the information collected in document E/CN.4/1501; subsequent to the transmission of that information further information was received which is presented in this document.

Submission from a non-governmental organization

Information received from the World Council of Churches:

"I have the honour and pleasure, on behalf of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches, to submit to you the attached two testimonies regarding the situation in Guatemala. I should like to request you to draw them to the attention of the Commission on Human Rights currently in session.

The first testimony is by a person who has for many years worked in the Province of El Quiché and who has lived with thousands of peasants and experienced first-hand machine gunnings, bombings and massacres committed by the Army in that region.

The second person is an indigenous catechist who testifies to the extermination programme of indigenous persons - one which the Army is carrying out since several months in the rural area.

These actions of the Army have been carried out in various localities of Chichicastenango in the cantons of Chumima, Sacpulup, Tzanimicabaj which were bombed by the infantry from the site (la plaza) of Chupol and from the air by helicopter gunships as well as by Cessna airplanes.

I hope that these testimonies contribute to the information which you are gathering based on last year's resolution of the General Assembly on Guatemala."

I. TESTIMONY OF SISTER PETRONILA WHO WORKED IN COMMUNITIES IN EL QUICHE

After a number of years during which the Church became more repressed in the north of Guatemala, we heard from catechists and Christian people that they needed priests or persons of rank within the Church to be with them.

There was one diocese which was completely closed down, without nuns, priests or bishop. It was in urgent need of Christian attention, since there were within it a number of persons who did not believe in God, and the peasants are profoundly religious. Consequently, there was great confusion in their minds and they did not know how to go about dealing with these problems.

We decided therefore to go in, although it might be contrary to the wishes of the bishops or the views of others. We have now been with them for some months. The persons who said that they did not believe in God do believe, but in their own way.

We knew that the army had told the Military Commissioners and the people "If you see a priest or nun, tell us, because you must hand them over dead or alive".

This is proved by all the priests and even missionaries that they have killed. So we spent some time celebrating masses and reading the Bible together. But during the last few days it was impossible, because they started to shell the villages, and it was the army that was doing the shelling. We could see them. In November, the whole Pan-American Highway, which joins the capital with the departments in the north of Guatemala, was closed off by the army. No one could enter or leave the villages. We saw tanks, guns and thousands of uniformed soldiers arrive. By 20 November, it was impossible to keep the people calm because they began to hear guns being fired at the villages from the highway. In one village where I was, every day at noon, we saw helicopters machine-gunning nearby villages.

In the middle of November, hundreds of people, mainly women and children fleeing villages which had been machine-gunned, began to arrive in our village. The situation was almost impossible because we had nothing to give them to eat, and we had no medicines. Many of the people arriving were wounded and many of the children were hungry and had no clothes. So we were forced to go up into the mountains (scrubland), right up into the mountains (far away from the houses), even at night. At that time of year, it is very cold there and sometimes rains. For about a week we didn't eat very much because the food was running out.

Up there, only a few plants grow to about this size (from 1 metre to 1.5 metres high). We sent a few people for food to the small stores, because sometimes, in the "ranchos", it is possible to buy a little maize, some beans and sugar - they sell it there at a higher price than in the city - (ranchos are small huts with cane or adobe walls, thatched roofs and earth floors). But many of these stores no longer existed because the army had burned them. So then we just cut leaves, fruit or huisquils (chayote, the fruit of a vine with a prickly husk, but with a good flavour) which we found in the countryside, and ears of maize, to cook and eat.

During that time, we received news from other villages nearby (in the Department of Chimaltenango) which had been starving for two weeks and which asked us for help. But we couldn't give any help because, on 30 November, they told us that it would be better if we left the village, because the army was near and had already killed a

woman who kept a mill and who had helped us greatly with food. The following day, 1 December, at 6.00 in the morning, shots were heard, and at 10.00 in the morning, they told us that we should leave the village, or we would very soon be killed. So we had to flee to the ravines with the women and children.

Then came our turn to be shelled. That day we had to flee. We ran for two hours, looking for the nearest ravine. We took all the wounded because we had many people who had come from other villages. Most of the wounded were women and children and had no clothes because the huts in which they lived had been burned. So we hid higher up in the mountains and in the woods. The problem was that the women wore very colourful clothes and we could be seen very easily from the helicopters. That is where we all were when we saw the helicopters begin to circle above us and when we saw that they were closing in we were very frightened. One flew like this, and the other in the opposite direction (in circles round the group). We heard them begin to fire machine-guns at the people there. The only way to save ourselves was to throw ourselves into the ravine, which was very deep. We began to run and run, all the way down the mountain. Another problem was that many of the women were carrying two children, one on their backs and the other in front, and had other children of four, five or six years of age, who ran along beside their mothers. Some of the men had stayed in the village to put up a bit of a defence. They said that they were going to set off fireworks (rockets on sticks used at celebrations) which they would aim down towards the plain (so as to frighten the soldiers a little). The worst time was when they shouted to us to run faster because the infantry was coming after us. We ran and ran for a long time, and then aeroplanes began to arrive and drop bombs on us and when they went off it was hot and there was a lot of noise; the same with the bullets. They told us that the army was coming after us with machine-guns firing at people, and that they were running after us and throwing grenades. All the children were screaming and the women were crying and calling to their children. The young children who were running along alone in the midst of so many people, were lost and were all crying and calling "mama, mama", and their mothers, when they saw that their children were not running beside them, turned back to fetch them. As the army was coming after us, many women who turned back were shot. We couldn't turn back to see them because the army was only 10 metres behind us. We just ran, threw ourselves down, got up and began to run again. When we reached the ravine, one woman fell down behind me, because the height (of the slope) was about six metres down to the river. She was carrying one child on her back and another which she dropped on the ground. She was covered in blood and one hand was dislocated. She called out to me "Help me, help me with my child; I can't carry him". I carried the child for a while, but I hadn't seen whether it was injured, because I just carried it and ran beside the woman. Then I heard the child scream and saw that his head was laid open. Another lady, who was behind me, helped me because I was tired and could not climb the other mountain which we had to climb. We ran, fell down, rolled down the slope, got up and started to run again. Again we fell down and got up and ran between the rocks and all through the woods. When we reached the river, when we finally reached the ravine, we had been running for six hours. At that time, the army was beginning to shell a little beyond the place where we had come out. We cleaned the wounds of the women and children. Some men ... we couldn't do anything, because some had dislocated arms, others dislocated legs. We had no sedatives for the pain. We crossed the river, which sometimes came up to our shoulders. Before we reached the deepest part, we were helped. Then we split up, some going one way, some another. So we left that place that day. That night, we hoped to find shelter in another village called Pajuliboy, and we were very shocked to find that all the people of the village, men, women and children, were fleeing as well. They all said to us, "Don't go there because the army is in the school and they're burning the huts".

So we went on with them. They knew the region and took us to another ravine. But then it began to rain heavily. The children began to cry with hunger. There was one family with three very small children who cried all the time. Their mother told me that they were hungry. I remembered that I had a small tamale, and I took it out and divided it into three little pieces. They ate it as it was, cold and hard. It was 7 o'clock at night and very dark. We put the wounded and a few children in a hut which had no walls, just a roof. We were seeing how everyone was; we were shivering with cold, under the trees ... one woman was weeping a lot ... she was speaking in Quiche. I didn't understand much of what she was saying. Another woman told me that she was crying because she said she had killed her child. And I saw the baby ... she had given birth 15 days before. She had been carrying the child on her back. She had fallen when running away, fallen on the baby, crushed it and killed it. That was why she was weeping. She said "God will punish me, I have a great sin hanging over me because I killed my child." The rest of us tried to tell her that God did not want her to suffer, but that it was because of the army that the child had died, when she was running away, and that she had not killed it. There were also other women crying and saying "I am not a good parent, I have lost my child; we only brought two, and there are three others lost in the woods." All night long there was the sound of people weeping, wounded groaning with pain, children crying with fear and hunger and women for their lost children, because once they were back together, they realized that their children were not there. So we spent the night, and part of the small hours, amid the cries and groans.

There was one moment when I could bear it no longer. I was trying to cheer people up, but when I saw so much... When they were a little calmer, I went away to cry, because I couldn't do anything for them. One woman said "God is not with us; God has abandoned us, although we have done nothing bad. If we have prayed to him so much, why does he abandon us now?" I could not find words ... I knew it was not God who was doing this to us ... but in the face of so much suffering, how could I make them understand that it was not God, but men, who were doing it?

At 3 a.m. the following day, we prepared to set off again, all in great pain because we had not rested. We were wet and had not slept during the night because, throughout the night, we had heard, on the other side of the ravine, the groans of the wounded of other groups of people from other villages. We cut leaves to eat and to give us a little strength to continue on our way. The following day we reached a village. We did not dare to enter it because we would have to climb a long way up a mountain and there was no vegetation. The mountain was so high that it could be seen from the highway where the soldiers were. And if they saw us, they would shell the other village. So we stayed in the woods and they brought us food there. When night fell, we began to climb the mountain to seek help in another village. But the following day, the aircraft once again began to fly over the area. On the radio, we had already heard the army saying "All indigenous people should return to their homes, because we are going to look after them ... It was the guerrillas who burnt people's crops and huts ...". And people said "How can we go back; if we go back they will kill us ...".

We divided into small groups in various villages, to make it easier to hide. I was able to go out to fetch a little food in another town. We were always running a risk, because we knew that, if we met the army, they would kill us. Particularly because we are physically very different from the indigenous people. But we had to take the risk if the people were not to starve. I remember that

one woman also said to me "They are going to kill us anyway. Would it not be better for us to fight, too? Don't you know a family that could look after my children? I want to fight to save my children ...". What they wanted were weapons, because they had no weapons. This is the testimony that I can give you.

II. TESTIMONY OF AN INDIGENOUS CATECHIST FROM ANOTHER VILLAGE IN THE SOUTH OF EL QUICHE

In August, the soldiers went to a district near Santa Cruz del Quiche itself (departmental capital) and began to search all the houses and to ask people whether they were catechists or were religious. They found out about a catechist, 27 years old, and they demanded that his wife should tell them where her husband was. The wife told them, "He's working". That's what she told them. Then they forced her to fetch her husband, and she went to fetch him, and then they began to torture him in front of her.

They left him for a while; and then there was another man who was a neighbour of his. The catechist had a lot of fruit of various types in his house and they forced his neighbour to bring down all the ripe fruit. The neighbour did not want to, but they forced him. They ate the fruit and, when they had finished eating, they said to the man, "This is how they help the guerrillas, that's why you gave us fruit, that's why you brought fruit for us". That's what they said to the man. The man said to them, "Perhaps I gave you fruit, but you forced me to bring it".

Then they again ordered the wife of the catechist to fetch her husband and they said to her "This is how they help the guerrillas ... very soon we are going to kill your husband before your eyes". That's what they said. Then the catechist's four children began to scream at the soldiers, "Don't kill my papa". Then the soldiers said to them, "If you're going to scream, we'll kill you the same way we're going to kill your father", they said to the children.

Then they began to torture the catechist and his neighbour, the one who had brought down the fruit, and they took them to a small ravine about 2½ metres deep. Then the wife said, "Don't kill him, don't kill him, if he's done nothing wrong". Then they said to the wife "If you're going to make a lot of noise, we'll kill you too". She said "Yes, kill me, better if you kill me, but with all my children". They were beating her, when a small boy came along another road to warn the people that other soldiers had killed a man. They grabbed the boy and said to him, "Why are you running along this road?" "I'm on an errand", said the boy. "Oh, no, you're a guerrilla; you're running an errand for the guerrillas; we're going to kill you here with these others", they said to the boy.

Then they asked the woman, "Do you have a hatchet, and a machete?" "Yes, we do", said the woman. "Go and get the hatchet; you're guerrillas; that's why you have a hatchet and that's why you have a machete in your house, (they're all farmers and they live from working the land) and we're going to use the hatchet to kill these three." Then they said, "If you scream, we'll kill you too." The woman did not want to do what they said and began to scream, and when they saw the woman and the children screaming, they said to them, "Don't scream, because if you scream, we're going to kill you as guerrillas ...".

When they saw that the woman didn't want to do it, one of the soldiers forced someone else to go and get the hatchet and the machete, and they went to fetch a log. And the others were torturing the three men in the ravine; and they brought the log and, as if they were cutting firewood, they cut off the heads of the three men, in front of the wife and four children.

Then they began to accuse all the people that were in the house, saying, "Anyone who has a hatchet and anyone who has a machete is a guerrilla". (They all have them for their work).

They went to all the neighbours' houses and told them, "Don't tell anybody, not even your children, that we are the ones that killed those three men. Because, if you tell, we will kill all of you - the whole village - the same way; and if we can't kill everybody, we'll bomb and burn all the houses; and if you don't keep quiet, we'll burn you alive to keep you quiet". That's what they said to everybody.

This is how they have killed many peasants and catechists in every region of Guatemala. It is mostly the native people that they kill. They told one woman, "We're going to exterminate them so that we don't have any more problems, because the native people only give us problems ...".

Also, in the last few days of December (1981), they went to other areas. Every day there were corpses or burned houses and many dead people and children. The bodies still have not been collected or buried, because ... it is not possible.

In another place, a group of women were taking "nixtamal" (maize cooked with water and lime for grinding) to the mill, when a truckload of soldiers drew up. The soldiers seized the women and asked them what they were going to do with the "nixtamal". They said that it was for their families, that's what they said, for their families. They seized the women, and one of them who resisted and didn't want to go, because her children were waiting for her at home, was hit with a rifle and forced into the truck.

The following day the troop of soldiers came out pushing in front of them the women, naked and badly tortured. They paraded them like that every day and finally released two of them. But the one who had resisted they paraded in many places; they tortured her and pushed her about, and we could do nothing because they would have killed us. The woman was kept naked and tortured for about a month. When they released her, she was ill. When we went to see her, she was weak and dying. She said to us, "It's better if I say nothing, otherwise they'll do the same to you". Then she died.

When they left some men hanging in the square itself, they asked the women who came into the market, "Do you know any of these?" Those who said they knew one of them were taken off straight away and not seen again. They were considered as having disappeared for good ...

Committee for Justice and Peace of Guatemala

International Commission

The work of righteousness shall be peace

Isaiah 32:17