

# Social Communicator

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*Article in tribute to the indigenous brothers of Totonicapán massacred the 4th of October, 2012 and the ancestral struggle of the Kiché community in defense of the earth, the forest, and the water.*



## TUM, CHIRIMÍA, AND COPAL FOR THE EARTH, FOREST, AND WATER

Some city dwellers will have heard of Totonicapán, though perhaps only for its famous wool “ponchos” or for the inhabitants’ fame as successful traders.

Some others will have passed through the territory on the way to Quetzaltenango, enjoying the beautiful landscape of Alaska or the summit that leads to “Cuatro Caminos”.

We met the leaders of the 48 communities of Totonicapán during our struggle in 2005 against the ratification of the destructive free trade agreement that Guatemala signed with the United States. I encountered an admirable, ancestral, and representative form of community organizing; perhaps the only of its kind in Guatemala.



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It is necessary to explain, even just with a few lines, who it is we are talking about when we speak of the 48 communities and the inhabitants of Totonicapán.

It is important to mention their historic rebellion in their struggle for independence in the 19th century, whose most publicized icon has been Atanasio Tzul. It is necessary to speak of their many contributions to different stages of struggle towards a life of dignity for the Guatemalan people. These struggles have been a constant for the people of Totonicapán.

The geography and ecology of Totonicapán has greatly benefited the inhabitants of around the territory. 1200 water sources exist in the forests of Totonicapán, providing for more than 100,000 people in rural and urban areas. What makes the natural richness of the area truly remarkable is the way in which the people of Totonicapán respect and protect it.

In April, 1998 López, E. of Greenpeace said that "the case of Totonicapán is one of the most notable examples of conservation and sustainable forest use in Central America". Despite being the department in Guatemala with the highest population density, Totonicapán has a well preserved and protected natural environment. At the time of the above quote Totonicapán had 300 inhabitants per square kilometre, and at the same time contained nearly 22,000 hectares of healthy forest.

The most important indicator species are the various species of pine (*P. Ayacahuite* and others) and the "Pinabete" (*Abies guatemalensis*). The community acts like a network in defense of their forest. Through collective efforts community members plant 100,000 new plants in their forests every year. They have rules and regulations for cutting firewood, for using wood to build houses, for handling forest animals, for reforestation, etc.

The level of community organization in Totonicapán has provided an example that many community organizations and networks have followed. It has also been attacked on different fronts. People in Totonicapán have had to resist various incentives from capitalist entities, including offers of money for giving up their land, for selling their water to transnational companies, etc.

***What does the blow suffered by the 48 communities of Totonicapán at the hands of the military mean for the people of Guatemala?***

In the days following October 4th corporate mass media were in charge of criminalizing the people of Totonicapán as "bochincheros" who block roads and inhibit the sacred right to "free movement" of people traveling on highways.

There are sometimes things that the media and other allies of the oppressors want us to forget, but that fortunately the people do not forget. During the past 9 months of the current government, there have been three actors coordinating the militarization of the country and the repression of the people. They champion their approach as a solution to the dissatisfaction that exists amongst the people of Guatemala.

The strategy of military control over the people and of protection of transnational capital is an election promise that has been articulated since last year and consists of various phases that we have addressed in previous bulletins (see “Route of Gold”, pg.20, bulletin 39), but that now we are witnessing. The phases are the following:

- Discrete, patient, long-term research on the strengths and weaknesses of local leaders in areas with natural resources and mineral wealth that will attract foreign investment.
- An inventory that quantitatively determines the approximate concentrations and volumes of these natural resources and minerals (also a long-term process).
- A growing and diverse legal framework that inhibits civil participation and criminalizes social protest (from the anti-hood law to the law that criminalizes roadblocks and related actions of CACIF).
- A complex network of submissive officials that are obedient to the various entities of the military-oligarchy complex (including centers for the administration of justice, the Public Prosecutors Office up the highest level, police officers, executive agencies, etc).
- Permanent media presence that is well financed and carefully crafted, with the help of major media corporations. This control over media is used to promote the right of corporations as the preminent right, above the right to life. Written and televised media use lurid headlines and shocking information about violence to attract attention, without having to discuss the roots of violence in Guatemala. When it suits them to have more crime on the streets they exacerbate the rates of crime reported in the media. When it suits them to have lower crime rates, they hide what is really happening.

- A permanent strategy to criminalize opposition, which is predominantly humble community organizations that are defending their land and territory. Through this strategy they exacerbate the conservative ideology that exists in urban areas and the racism that exists in the media.
- The placement of officials in charge of internal security of the country (interior and defense) that combines counter-insurgency strategies (from the time of the armed conflict and genocide) with new “expertise” in the fight against what they call “threats of violence and terrorism”.
- Working to elevate the profile of the Executive Body to promote the image of international cooperation as the diplomatic body of Guatemala. This is to give the sense that these oligogarchic-military authorities are “statesmen” incapable of giving orders to kill or to act in the style of the 1980s.

Something else that has been underestimated by social organizations working in defense of land and territory is that, apart from all the strategies above, the officials who lead this process of looting the country also have a diversity of responses prepared for the different forms of resistance that have appeared.

1. One of the most efficient responses from those in power today is not only to directly harm organizations, but at the same time to cause confusion. They create rumours that are picked up by media, and create confusion amongst the public. Some examples:

a) Student protest against the lengthening of teacher training and the destruction of the career of teaching.



Common actor: The Minister of Governance and the Minister of Defence, media distorting students struggles, anonymous actors that infiltrate and cause confrontation between the students. Unknown assumptions incite clash between police and students.

Final stage of the problem: more confrontation between students and authorities, zero solutions to the problems, criminalization of the students. The division created between students difficult to solve in the immediate future.

b) Protest by indigenous peasants from Barillas, Huehuetenango, before the installation of a hydroelectric project that they were not consulted on.

Common Actor: Minister of Governance and Minister of Defence, media distorting the facts, fiscal agents of the MP acting in favour of the company, pressure on justice officials coming from the Executive and the transnational company involved, diplomatic pressures. Supposed strangers burn company machinery. MP collects evidence of crimes in helicopter paid for by the company.

Final stage of the problem: Peasants criminalized and detained without a fair trial and without a single means of proving that they were linked to the problems, a peasant murdered by assassins hired by the company, hundreds of peasants beaten. The problem is not resolved, only aggravated in by the State of Siege.



**Note:** In the case of Barillas, the protests that have been focused on are those in communities in the area where the hydroelectric project is located. Other communities farther north and in the centre of the municipality have to some extent been co-opted by the company and the government, in an effort to turn them against their own brothers in the communities closer to the project.

Apart from that, organizations that accompany the communities have had their offices attacked. Also note that the prosecutor who originally took on the case was later requested to separate herself from it. She invented an attack on herself in a region under the control of the military, and then blamed the attack on a social organization.

Also note that the social fabric of Barillas has been weakened, compared to other regions, as a result of all these factors. The danger is that these communities, in their weakened state, will accept an agreement with the company that will be counter-productive in the future. Some prisoners from Barillas have been harassed in jail and asked to accept money and agreements.

Implementing a stage of siege in Barillas was another approach that, although it may appear to have failed, has achieved the objective of the oligarchic military complex, which is to have control over territories that are strongly opposed to the exploitation of their natural resources.



c) Protests in Totonicapán. In addition to specific demands such as those related to the high cost of electrical power service, residents called for recognition within the constitutional reform of their communal property mechanisms and other forms of community organization.

Common Actor: Minister of Governance and Minister of Defence, media, high level officials (Prosecutor's Office for Human Rights, President, Vice President)

Final stage of the problem: 8 peasants massacred by army soldiers. A problem without a solution.

The President an accomplice, by defending the indefensible in the media. Threatening things said, and the President blaming the massacre on the leaders of Totonicapán.

***In this case, the oligarchic military complex tries other methods:***

An immediate offensive to deny the facts. A Chancellor that attempts to discount the violence in Totonicapán by comparing it to the daily violence that occurs in the country, saying that it's a lot of fuss for these deaths when many more people die every day in Guatemala.

This Chancellor, and fundamentalist pastor, forgot to say that many people die daily due to malnutrition and the neglect of the state.

That is to say, if we read between the lines of the media mumbo-jumbo we can see that the media accepts that this government is killing the people of Guatemala in a thousand ways (malnutrition, repression, neglect of its constitutional mandate to ensure public safety).

The offensive is not only on the part of the diplomatic corps in Guatemala, they have also joined the UN Security Council. At this point we might ask: ***What threats exist that a third world country such as Guatemala aspires to be part of said Council?*** We leave our readers to come up with the answer.





Another immediate answer to the problem was the reaction of the Archbishop. In contrast to his predecessor, he has been ingratiating himself with the sugar capitalists of the country since the beginning of his term. He was one of the first to comment on the case of Totonicapán.

Despite the situation of his poor parishioners, he criminalized the community members of Totonicapán and made a call to community leaders to stop using people as "cannon fodder".

Does this kind of approach seem familiar to you? During the armed conflict it was also said that indigenous people were being used as "cannon fodder". Welcome back to the devaluing of indigenous struggles.

Something that is in fashion now is that after government actions have been taken that seem to be anomalous to a public official, members of Congress will ask these officials for clarification.

Although this could be used to ensure accountability, in reality it is just a show that feeds media curiosity and provides a conflict that all officials try to capitalize on to strengthen their electoral strength.

As we could see, the opposition party of this government named LIDER, succeeded in bringing together more than 20,000 people opposing the actions of the Government.

It is the custom to take advantage of difficult circumstances to gain followers without really caring about or dealing with the root of the problem. Likewise, they used their existing members to attain an electoral base through the case of Barillas in Huehuetenango.

### *What is really happening in Guatemalan politics in wake of the events of Totonicapán?*

Note that, in the moment that soldiers attacked the protest of 48 communities from Totonicapán, a representative from Totonicapán was trying to meet with and had begun talks with the President of the Republic.

It is clear that this was an attempt to attack the direct dialogue between the community and political authorities.

The Government demonstrated that they will receive the community's concerns in the office, but also shot a few bullets to make it clear who is boss. Note that the Government knew of the planned activity well enough in advance to send the military to the scene the night before.

Not even 24 hours had passed after the massacre when other actors emerged in the media, trying to capitalize on the conflict to serve their own interests. We saw members of a group that believes in this government - the Economic Social Council - offer their services to promote dialogue and deal with the crisis.

We are likely approaching the establishment of a new system that some analysts call “civil society”, which will replace the previous actors whose struggles were in response to classist approaches and were in the defense of territory and collective rights.

This new system will offer new civil society organizations based on elite organizations, generally located in cities, with youth in white t-shirts who have become partners with the Government on specific issues within the country.

For those who do not accept this new system, the consequence is clear: bullets and criminalization, or simply the disregard of their demands. That is... if the people permit it to be this way.

The recovery of the dignity of our people is still a challenge, a constant struggle that will unfortunately keep us at the level of “protest” for quite some time, even though the business people say that they want us to be more “proactive” in solving our problems.

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