

Lucas, Leah '14
Grinnell Peace Studies Student Conference Spring 2012
Final Paper

Violence Causes Hunger in Guatemala: From Coups to CAFTA

Central America's long history of violence has had catastrophic effects on the region's fight for food security. Hunger continues to be a rampant problem throughout the region as a whole, especially in the conflict-ridden country of Guatemala. Violence has plagued the Guatemalan people throughout history, both in physical violence occurring in the country, often targeting ethnic minorities, as well as in violence inflicted from more powerful countries through oppressive trade policies. Present-day hunger in Guatemala is directly connected to the history of violence and brutality in the nation, which has served as a significant obstacle to achieving food security. In addition to the more traditional physical violence experienced throughout Guatemala's history, the United States has waged a new form of neo-liberal violence that disadvantages subsistence farmers in Central and South America by subsidizing producers of principle grains in the U.S. Through these policies, the United States inflicts indirect violence against the Guatemalan people by supporting policies which lead to more hunger, poverty, starvation, and death. In order to reverse decades of subordination and to promote peace in Guatemala, the United States must restructure its subsidy programs for principle U.S. grain producers so as to end the war waged on Latin American farmers. By adopting more equitable trade and agriculture policies, the U.S. can decrease hunger in Guatemala and promote peace throughout the country and region.

One of the United States' first overt acts of violence in Guatemala dates back to 1954, when the CIA helped set the stage for the brutal civil war, now considered genocide, by

supporting the country's first military regime.¹ This violence raged on from 1960-1996 and resulted in over 200,000 deaths. In addition, over half a million people were displaced, 500,000 fled to Mexico for refuge, and 250,000 children were orphaned.² When one lives in such a state of unrest, without his or her most basic right to life protected, logically, food security may not top the priority list. As one of the informants of Sophia Murriss' research in Guatemala stated, "Life before the war was tranquilo. We grew milpa, frijoles and papas. We raised chickens, cows, pigs and horses . . . we did not suffer from hunger."³ However, after the conflict, their once stable lifestyle was ripped out from under them, as demonstrated through the people's collective account: "The war lasted for 36 years, many people were killed; we had nothing but hunger and thirst . . . We suffered a lot."⁴ Therefore, by supporting the beginning of these violent uprisings in Guatemala, the United States set the stage for the stark hunger and inequity which exists today in this impoverished nation.

The importance of the number of people living in poverty is due to the correlation between poor and food-insecure households. In Guatemala alone, the United Nations Development Program report, "Human Development in Guatemala 2000," states that about 57% of the population of 12 million is poor. However, civil society groups report the true percentage to be even higher, with estimates of over 80%. To support this higher estimate, a study by the UN's Fund for Children and Adolescents reported that from 2008-2009, 78.5% of Guatemalan children and adolescents lived in poverty.⁵ Central American countries such as Guatemala, which

¹ Murriss, Sophia. "Nosotros sufrimos mucho: Trauma and bereavement after La Violencia, Guatemala." University Utrecht (2011): 1-58. <http://igitur-archive.library.uu.nl/student-theses/2011-0808-200523/Murriss,%20S.pdf>.

² Cevallos, Diego. "Anti-Poverty Programmes Abound, but Poverty Deepens." Inter Press Service News Agency, 17 Sept. 2005. <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=30318>.

³ Murriss. "Nosotros sufrimos mucho" 10.

⁴ Ibid. 11.

⁵ G. Aguilar Sanchez, Carlos G. "Free Markets and the Food Crisis in Central America." *Upside Down World*, November 22, 2011 <http://upsidedownworld.org/main/international-archives-60/3319-free-markets-and-the-food-crisis-in-central-america>.

are severely impoverished, have little resistance to external forces such as climatic challenges or civil unrest, and as a result, their access to food is severely limited. Economic hardships directly reduce calories consumed by the poorest members of society. In the case of the Central American drought, a great climatic crisis in the beginning of the century, the indigenous Chorti experienced the highest levels of hunger.⁶

In response to a Central American drought in the early 2000s, Peruvian Francisco Roque, the WFP director for Central America and the Caribbean, stated, "The country that worries us most is Guatemala." He went on to state that malnutrition affects 27 % of children under age five in some rural Guatemalan communities.⁷ The people of Central America and Guatemala face significant challenges to their health as a result of this turbulent past, as confirmed by current measures of hunger and malnourishment. Overall, Guatemala averages around a 250 k-cal deficiency per person. Recent U.S. policies have served as additional challenges to achieving food security.

New trade agreements, like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which enforce neo-liberal ideas, have decreased food security in Latin America. NAFTA has caused a wide-spread transition away from the formerly self-subsistent agrarian lifestyles of the people, and created a widespread dependency on imports and food aid. Post-NAFTA, subsidized food grains flooded Latin American markets and prevented domestic farmers from being able to compete. Mexico received slight advantages in relation to other Latin American countries, and Guatemala, like much of the region, was severely disadvantaged.⁸ To illustrate this phenomenon, in 2005, agriculture contributed less to the regional GDP than remittances, and agricultural land

⁶ Muñoz, Néfer. "400,000 People Suffer the Curse of Hunger." *Tierramerica*, 2001
<http://www.tierramerica.net/2001/1007/iarticulo.shtml>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Cohen, Salomon. "CAFTA: What could it mean for migration?" Migration Information Source (2006)
<http://www.migrationinformation.org/USFocus/display.cfm?ID=388>.

use decreased by 7.4% in the three year period of time between 2005 and 2008. From the early 1990s to 2005, the amount of regional land planted in the principal crops of rice, beans, corn and sorghum fell by half, after being replaced with goods for export. The amount of land being used for agricultural purposes also decreased 7.4% in the three year span from 2005-2008.⁹

The implementation of such neo-liberal policies has fundamentally restructured the way of life for countless Guatemalans who previously practiced subsistence agriculture and now are forced to import principle grains for consumption. However, even more destructively, the policies have “caused a fragmentation of national territory that deepens the divisions between the centers of political and economic power and the periphery— rural areas, indigenous peoples, [and] people of African descent...” The Institute for Agricultural and Rural Studies analyzed how policies such as the Central American and Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) de-incentivize domestic production of the food products that are flooding into the countries’ markets at subsidized prices. By the time the country realizes that the imported foodstuffs have become more expensive, it is too late, because the country has already transferred the resources for production and sacrificed its ability to produce the most basic food staples.¹⁰ The impoverished people then are left with nothing to eat but their tropical flowers and palm oil when they cannot afford the inflated market prices.

A number of free trade agreements have decreased the biodiversity of the ecosystem, and are therefore violent against the populations that depend upon the earth’s resources for survival. The Association of Guatemalan Palm Growers stated that “palm oil monocultures are growing about 3,238 thousand acres per year in that country alone . . . promoting the systematic territorial

⁹ G. Aguilar Sanchez, Carlos G. "Free Markets and the Food Crisis in Central America." *Upside Down World*, November 22, 2011 <http://upsidedownworld.org/main/international-archives-60/3319-free-markets-and-the-food-crisis-in-central-america>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

displacement of local indigenous and farming communities.”¹¹ No longer are the indigenous and rural communities able to produce the rice, beans, corn and sorghum on which they subsist, but they must forfeit this way of life if they hope to make a living and provide for their family. Free trade has not achieved its propagated goal of reducing poverty, but has instead oppressed the poor communities of Guatemala, restructuring their land and their lives.

While U.S. support for the physical violence in Guatemala today is more sanctioned than in years past due to our increasingly multipolar world, this new form of violence – working through neoliberal policies to inflict hunger on the impoverished people – continues to be widespread and largely unchecked across the country and region. Guatemalan households are left with little security and little hope to control their futures which now lie in the hands of the market, international corporations and foreign governments. The 2008 State of the Region Report calculated that “an increase of 15% in the price of food could mean 2.5 million more people in extreme poverty” in Guatemala.¹² This increase in poverty would undoubtedly also increase the number of people suffering from hunger. In the words of Sanchez, “the link between trade liberalization and food availability is becoming a critical factor that, far from improving living conditions, threatens to deepen and entrench the structural causes of hunger, violence and malnutrition in the region.”¹³

The dire and vulnerable position of many poor Guatemalans who struggle with hunger creates a paradox when considering the region’s production of plenty. Over 52 million people in Latin America suffer from hunger or malnutrition, while “the region is the largest exporter of

¹¹ G. Aguilar Sanchez, Carlos G. "Free Markets and the Food Crisis in Central America." *Upside Down World*, November 22, 2011 <http://upsidedownworld.org/main/international-archives-60/3319-free-markets-and-the-food-crisis-in-central-america>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

food on the planet.”¹⁴ Clearly the hunger and malnutrition of Guatemala’s people stems from the blatant inequities in the world system, which work to systematically exclude the country from competing on an equal playing field. Subsidies for U.S. agriculture and free trade policies by the U.S. and other developed nations may not appear to be violent acts in themselves, but when they are causing the sickness, starvation, and death of our neighbors just south, there could be no acts more violent.

The question that remains is what the United States should do today to remedy our history of oppressive acts in Latin America. The challenge of the future will be to find appropriate policies to respect and support small-holder farmers in developing countries, while still providing for the great demands of the developed world. As Rafael González, a Guatemalan indigenous activist and chair of the Committee for Campesino Unity, stated, “If we truly want to eradicate injustice at its very roots, we would have to do away with these disposable programmes that basically provide charity and serve the purposes of political corruption, since they are implemented to buy votes or hand out favours to business owners.”¹⁵ José Graziano de Silva, former Minister of Food Security and Hunger Relief in Brazil, agreed that the answer to the human rights crisis of hunger lies in establishing a comprehensive development program which is centrally-based: “What remains is for the countries of the region to commit a stable budget to the eradication of hunger.”¹⁶

The recommendation to create a stable budget to secure the health and well-being of the population is a novel one; however, “according to estimates by the WFP and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC),” solving child malnutrition in

¹⁴ “Freeing Latin America and the Caribbean from hunger.” *FAO Newsroom*, February 2008
<http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/focus/2008/1000780/index.html>.

¹⁵ Cevallos. “Anti-Poverty Programmes Abound”

¹⁶ Estrada, Daniela. “Historic Chance to Get Rid of Hunger.” *Inter Press Service News Agency*, October 15, 2007
<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=39658>.

Central America and the Dominican Republic would cost about 6.7 billion dollars, “equivalent to 6.4 percent of the combined gross domestic product of those countries.”¹⁷ Clearly countries of the region cannot achieve their goal to eradicate child malnutrition by 2015 on their own.

However, as da Silva optimistically asserts, “We believe this to be possible with international aid and coordination between countries and the U.N. agencies.”¹⁸ According to J.W. Smith, in order to eliminate world hunger, we must take very specific steps including protecting weak individuals from the legally protected multinationals, managing trade to protect both developed and developing countries (while returning the dispossessed to their land), and allowing small-holder farmers to cultivate nutritious high calorie crops for household consumption. Therefore, after the initial international aid that da Silva argues is necessary to reestablish subsistence agriculture in Guatemala, the country will be able to provide for its people, independent of the U.S. market for grains.

Until the United States takes proper actions to right the wrongs of the past, violence will continue to be rampant in Latin America as millions are impoverished and do not have their most basic rights protected; perhaps most notably, the right to an adequate nutritious diet. Guatemala must work to reestablish the lifestyle of subsistence followed before the violent acts of intervention by the United States to sponsor military regimes and promote unfair free trade. Such a process would include an influx of aid in the short-term to help Guatemala convert its resources back to factors of subsistence agriculture production, followed by a “hands-off” policy by the U.S. By promoting more equitable agricultural trade policies in Guatemala today, the United States can help facilitate the transition from its violent history to a more food-secure, and thus, more peaceful future.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

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