

Exhumations

The story of Rabinal

Rabinal is a northern town in Guatemala inhabited by Mayan indigenous people. The people of Rabinal suffered high rates of violence during civil conflict and repression during the period of military dictatorship. Violence officially ceased with the peace accords in late 1996. Since then citizens have kept alive the memories of the massacres that occurred, and claimed that one of the biggest mass graves in the country could be found inside the military headquarters ('Destacamento') on the outskirts of the town. In December 2003, legal documents were released approving the identification and the opening of the 'Destacamento'. Finally the exhumations began in April 2004. The first bodies were found after digging seven metres deep in what seemed to be a tunnel containing more than thirty bodies.

Not all the citizens of Rabinal were in favour of the exhumations, and community tensions existed prior to the beginning of the exhumations. On the one hand, some people thought that the exhumations might interfere with the social reconciliation processes that were taking place in the aftermath of violence. Whilst others

(usually the family members of the disappeared - 'desaparecidos') were desperate to know what had happened to their loved ones, the circumstances of their disappearances and deaths. Also, many were distressed because according to Mayan culture, it is important to bury the dead properly; giving appropriate treatment to the spirits of the dead will impact the dignity and well being of the survivors.



Psychosocial support

It was the family members of the missing who got in touch with the psychosocial organisation ECAP with whom they were familiar because of previous work with the community. ECAP psychosocial workers networked with community leaders, forensic anthropologists, and human rights lawyers to lobby for the official permits to start the digging up of the potential mass grave at "el destacamento". Now that the digging has begun, the psychosocial programme is continuing to support the people of Rabinal through the process of exhumation. The programme is addressing the needs of people at a number of levels:

- **Individual support** of the family members and close relatives of the 'desaparecidos' who will often re-experience grief, rage, guilt, and sadness during the exhumation process.
- **Community work** to deal with potential polarization of the community by the creation of spaces for reflection where the

exchange of experiences of violence is allowed, and where the memories of the survivors are accepted as part of their history. Encouraging the community to work together in the search for solutions regarding community problems.

- **Work in schools.** Following the suggestion of the community ECAP are supporting leaders in helping children to understand the exhumations. Children are taken to the exhumation site, and then, with their leaders and ECAP personnel, encouraged to explore their ideas on life and death, and the affect of violence on the dynamics of their community through discussion, art and drama.
- **Human rights work** to facilitate the legal processes in the search for the truth, making sure that evidence of the violence, and the killings is brought to the appropriate human rights actors to mediate appropriate reparations be they moral or economic.

For further details or enquiries, please contact:

The Psychosocial Working Group
Institute for International Health & Development
Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh
Edinburgh EH12 8TS
United Kingdom

Tel: + 44 131 317 3491

Fax: + 44 131 317 3494

Email: ewright@qmuc.ac.uk



Christian Children's Fund



Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma



Solomon Asch Center



Drawing on the Psychosocial Working Group's conceptual framework

The work of ECAP in Rabinal reflects many of the principles of the PWG conceptual framework. It is concerned to support the community through the experiences of exhumations in order to promote reconciliation, develop a shared understanding of the past, and to empower people to tackle future challenges more effectively. This focuses on the principles of **transformation** and **empowerment** at the heart of the PWG conceptualisation.

The approach hinges on the building and enhancement of resources. **Human capacity** is strengthened by providing support to individuals, in particular the family members and close relatives of the 'desaparecidos' by providing the opportunity to express thoughts, feelings and emotions that are not usually part of the discourse of the people. The **culture and values** of the community are respected in ensuring appropriate treatment of the dead. Providing a safe

context for both adults and children to talk about their experiences of the conflict and develop shared understandings also strengthens the cultural identity of the community. The programme builds the **social ecology** of the community by encouraging people to work together and acknowledge their own resilience and collective resources.

The programme is also concerned with **human rights** issues providing a holistic approach by co-ordinating the roles of community leaders, social workers, psychologists, lawyers, forensic anthropologists and individuals. Not only does it address relationships within the community on which future social cohesion depends, but also the links between the community and society at large, on which justice so often depends.

Who are the PWG?

The membership of the Psychosocial Working Group comprises five academic partners (Institute for International Health & Development, Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh; Columbia University, Program on Forced Migration & Health; Harvard Program on Refugee Trauma; Solomon Asch Centre for the Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict and University of Oxford, Refugee Studies Centre) and five humanitarian agencies (Christian Children's Fund; International Rescue Committee, Program for Children Affected by

Armed Conflict; Medecins sans Frontieres - Holland; Mercy Corps and Save the Children Federation). The work of the group has been supported by a grant from the Andrew Mellon Foundation. Further details at: www.forcedmigration.org/psychosocial and www.qmuc.ac.uk/iidh.