

SYNOPSIS:

## THE BURIED TRUTH Guatemala, the silent genocide

Miquel DEWEVER-PLANA

***"Please spread the word so that the world knows what we went through, how much we suffered....And I hope that my testimony will be heard..."***

Like Doña Catarina, of Maya Ixil origin, scores of victims with whom I had the opportunity of sharing the daily experience of living for several years, expressed the same request : « tell our story ». To exorcise this suffering, buried deeply in their psyches for more than twenty years, with the hope that the world will learn about their tragic fate, will allow these Guatemalans to attach a meaning to their drama.

***"I can't take it any longer, there is only pain in my heart when I talk about it, there is only pain when the words spring out from the depth of my being "***

To bare witness is not easy because it implies once again confronting the reality which left each of them psychologically destroyed. It is, however, a response to the forced silence, and in the end a moral duty to want to share an experience as awful as it is unknown, and this despite threats, distrust, fear, shame or the feeling of guilt for "having survived."

Virtually invisible to the eyes of the elite for five centuries, today the Mayas make themselves more and more seen and heard, and force Guatemala to engage in the exercise of memory on a thirty-five year (1961-1996) conflict, the most terrible part of which occurred under the rule of the generals Romeo Lucas Garcia (1978-1982) and Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983). Indeed, both Truth Commissions (1998 and 1999), one of them supervised by the United Nations, have clearly denounced the governments of the period as responsible for a genocide. Yet, during the events, the media showed very little interest, and failed to report the most important human tragedy of the 20th century in the Americas. This leads us to wonder about the efficacy, objectivity, and freedom of the press of our western democracies.

More than 200,000 dead, 45,000 missing, 667 massacres, 430 villages wiped out, 150,000 refugees, a million and a half displaced: more that 83% of the victims were Mayas and 94% of the massacres were committed by the army. Behind these frightening numbers, there are names none of which will ever be effaced from the memory of the survivors.

This hidden genocide is better known today thanks to forensic anthropologists who continue to dig up mass graves in almost every part of Guatemala in order to uncover all those who for so long had been labeled as "disappeared." The bones of men, women, and children, slaughtered more than twenty years ago, buried in mass pauper's graves, have now been found. They reveal the truth about the atrocities suffered during these decades of violence, because henceforth "the bodies of our dead ones speak to us and testify."

Each victim we meet, every testimony that is recorded, gradually revives History, giving the lie to the official interpretation of these shameful acts, which continues to deny them or minimize the magnitude of the crime.

These exhumations will allow the survivors to proclaim to the world: "What I was saying was not a lie. Here they are." They will be given a burial in a place where their loved ones will be able to bring them flowers, food, incense, and once again reestablish a brutally interrupted relationship. The work of these forensic anthropologists is, therefore, extremely important, not only because it allows the preservation of the memory of the victims, but also because the laboratory analyses can in most cases reconstruct the circumstances of the death and the identity of the victims, but also of their murderers. It is a first step toward what may seem the improbable bringing to justice the authors of these crimes.

But when my eyes turn toward Guatemala, I see only death, exploitation, discrimination, impunity, poverty, violence; and in spite of all my efforts, I cannot see hope in the future. I wish I were wrong and pray that the recovery of the collective memory, as painful as it would be, leads this people toward reconciliation, which can only be lasting if it is based on truth and justice.