



One of Guatemala's thousands of "disappeared" citizens. Image courtesy of Mary Ellen Davis.

Postcard from Guatemala

"I read the news today, oh boy ..."

JOHN LENNON and PAUL MCCARTNEY
"A Day in the Life" (1967)

The café that I frequented during the war years no longer exists. It was its own combat zone one rainy morning when the girlfriend of the owner, a Guatemalan of Italian descent, found out that he had been cheating on her. Drenched to the skin, she burst through the door with a basket full of stones, which she began to hurl at him. My cappuccino was put on hold while the startled miscreant spun around, dodging the missiles that crashed into the mirrored gantry behind him. The assault lasted a calamitous minute, my command of Spanish blasphemy increasing with each throw. After the mayhem was over, the owner looked at me and shrugged. He then served me coffee rather than attend to the fallout of spilled liquor and broken glass. He nodded at the table where I had the newspapers spread out.

"As bad as yesterday?" he inquired.

"Even worse," I replied.

"I'll leave you to it."

So he left me to it, reading the news of Guatemala as it was reported in Guatemala that particular day – and for countless others during my visits to the country between 1981 and 1995. Vestiges of a war that began in 1961 and that formally ended with a peace accord in 1996 not only linger but have spawned their own post-conflict predicaments. These are often as challenging for journalists to engage as the ones they grappled with at the height of civil strife from 1978 to 1983. What sorts of items constitute the daily fare of the Guatemalan press but seldom register here in Canada? Another memorable trip – I have made over sixty in the past forty years – affords me the opportunity to peruse and relay.



Sunday, June 30, 2013

THE DAY BEFORE Canada Day is Army Day in Guatemala. I arrive in the late afternoon and pick up the *Prensa Libre*, the country's most widely read newspaper, which I read in the peace and quiet of Antigua, the old colonial capital I much prefer to the bustle and frenzy of Guatemala City. Hitherto a gala spectacle of medalled authority and military paraphernalia, Army Day isn't what it used to be, primarily because the national armed forces aren't what they used to be. "AN ARMY OF LEFTOVERS" declares the *Prensa Libre* headline.

A four-page feature documents the military's demise, the result of the implementation of the peace accord, which called for a significant reduction in army personnel and its prominent role in everyday life. Today, the ranks of the army total 23,000, two thirds its size at the pinnacle of counter-insurgency in the early 1980s, when attacks on unarmed civilians ushered in a reign of terror and, in the eyes of a UN Truth Commission, constituted acts of genocide when perpetrated against indigenous Maya communities in remote highland regions. Now, with ten soldiers for every ten thousand inhabitants, Guatemala's is the lowest such ratio in all Latin America. The



IMAGE COURTESY OF MARY ELLEN DAVIS

decline in manpower is paralleled by a chronic lack of equipment, leading *Prensa Libre* to conclude that “a weak institution with paltry resources is unable to guard even minimally, by land, sea, or air, our nation’s borders.” Have the mighty fallen that far?

Statistics often conceal as much as they reveal. The current president of Guatemala, Otto Pérez Molina, is himself a former general. Under his watch the army has taken to the streets and the countryside, purportedly to increase public security in the face of widespread gang violence and rampant drug trafficking. A photograph of Pérez Molina in the next day’s *Prensa Libre* shows him, as commander-in-chief of the national armed forces, proudly surveying his troops. Mention is also made of the presence in Guatemala of US Secretary of State John Kerry, there to mark the delivery from the US Southern Command of 42 military vehicles along with the counsel of US military advisers. Given the impact of past US interference in Guatemalan affairs – the CIA was behind the overthrow in 1954 of democratically elected president Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán, whose program of moderate agrarian reform was deemed a threat to American business interests, those of the United Fruit Company in particular – Mr Kerry cast an ominous spell simply by ghosting in and out around Army Day.

Tuesday, July 2, 2013

STATISTICS ONCE AGAIN suffuse the pages of *Prensa Libre*, today's revealing more than they conceal. "SUPPLIES OF CORN AND BEANS ARE RUNNING OUT," the headline states, food security as opposed to public security being undermined on account of "high prices and low purchasing power," with "poor families in dire need." Amid reports of malnutrition on par with African levels plaguing eastern parts of the country, a survey by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) identifies issues of access, not overall production, as the crux of the problem. Its trenchant analysis is echoed by the findings of local officials. Despite the juggernaut of globalization that has transformed age-old ways, Guatemala is still an agrarian society. But it is not a poor country; it has been made so by crippling geographies of inequality, especially in relation to land tenure.

Some 65 percent of agricultural holdings are controlled and operated by 3 percent of owners, a consequence of which is that a mere 15 percent of total farmland is shared among more than 85 percent of all other owners. Most rural Guatemalans can no longer feed themselves adequately from their own plots; the native peoples whom novelist Miguel Ángel Asturias epitomized as "men of maize" have long served as hired hands for wealthy plantation owners, who grow crops for export, not internal consumption. The FAO survey ascertains that the monthly wage for agricultural labourers averages 2,421.75 *quetzales* (roughly \$300.00), falling short of the cost of a "basic minimum" to feed a family by 350.25 *quetzales*. Guatemala remains, in the fitting words of historian Severo Martínez Peláez, "a country of a few," not "a country for all." Any talk of agrarian reform is frowned upon, and nixed, by the elite lobby known as the Comité Coordinador de Asociaciones Agrícolas, Comerciales, Industriales y Financieras (CACIF), whose priorities dominate and prevail, straitjacketing the political economy of Guatemala and castigating as "subversive" any group or individual perceived to challenge the status quo.

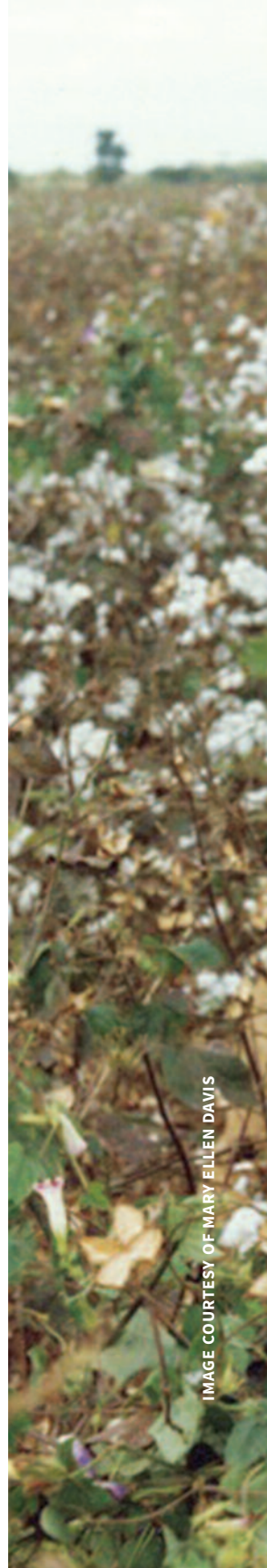


IMAGE COURTESY OF MARY ELLEN DAVIS



Cotton pickers from Todos Santos Cuchumatán.

Wednesday, July 3, and Thursday, July 4, 2013

THE *Prensa Libre* buries in its interior pages the state of play in the trial of former president (and army general) Efraín Ríos Montt. He stands accused, along with the former head of military intelligence, José Rodríguez Sánchez, of genocide and crimes against humanity, specifically in relation to Ixil Maya communities in 1982 and 1983, when his seventeen-month presidency witnessed among the worst of atrocities committed during the armed conflict.

On January 28, Judge Miguel Ángel Gálvez ruled that the case against Ríos Montt would be heard in Guatemala's Supreme Court, the first such tribunal anywhere in the world in which a one-time head of state was held



to account in the country he governed. On May 10, presiding judge Yassmin Barrios and her two associates, Patricia Bustamante García and Pablo Xitumul de Paz, found Ríos Montt guilty and sentenced him to eighty years in prison, where he was dispatched directly from the courtroom. Elite outrage was epitomized by CACIF's vehement criticism of the verdict. While the deeds deliberated upon are generally agreed to have occurred, the charge of genocide is disputed and denied. Furthermore, Ríos Montt and his lawyers assert that he has immu-

nity from prosecution on the basis of an amnesty granted by the military dictator who ousted him from power, General Humberto Mejía Víctores.

For ten days, justice finally appeared to have been served. Impunity, however, runs deep; its beneficiaries made it clear that the Supreme Court's ruling would not be tolerated. On May 20, citing lack of due legal diligence, the Constitutional Court overturned the verdict and ordered a retrial, set for January 2015. Ríos Montt, now 88 years of age, frail of health but defiant of spirit, was released from captivity and placed once again under house arrest.



A witness gives evidence against former president Efraín Ríos Montt (left) .



Rosa Elena Hernández
Nacida el 14 de mayo de 1950

MEMORIA, VERDAD Y JUSTICIA



Gustavo Rodríguez
N.I.I.O.E.

POR LA MEMORIA, LA VERDAD Y LA JUSTICIA



Carolina Díaz Cordero José Manuel Díaz Cordero

N.I.I.O.E.

POR LA MEMORIA, LA VERDAD Y LA JUSTICIA



RODRIGO CÁRDENO ACUÑA

NACIÓ EL 11 DE DICIEMBRE DE 1961
41 AÑOS DETENIDO - DESAPARECIDO
POR EL REGIMEN DE GUATEMALA
RECLAMAMOS MEMORIA, VERDAD Y JUSTICIA

¿DÓNDE ESTÁN?



Francisco Aguilar
N.I.I.O.E.

POR LA MEMORIA, LA VERDAD Y LA JUSTICIA

¿DÓNDE ESTÁN?



César José Martínez
N.I.I.O.E.

POR LA MEMORIA, LA VERDAD Y LA JUSTICIA

¿DÓNDE ESTÁN?



Roberto Hernández
N.I.I.O.E.

POR LA MEMORIA, LA VERDAD Y LA JUSTICIA

¿DÓNDE ESTÁ?



Ricardo José Barrios, un hombre

Nombre: Ricardo José Barrios, un hombre
Fecha de nacimiento: 15 de mayo de 1945
Lugar de nacimiento: Guatemala
Estado civil: Casado
Ocupación: Profesor
Religión: Católica
Familia: 3 hijos
Educación: Secundaria
Experiencia: 15 años de experiencia en la enseñanza
Motivos de denuncia: Fue detenido y desaparecido por el régimen de Guatemala
Reclamamos: Memoria, Verdad y Justicia

¿DÓNDE ESTÁN?



Roberto Hernández
N.I.I.O.E.

POR LA MEMORIA, LA VERDAD Y LA JUSTICIA

¿DÓNDE ESTÁN?



Roberto Hernández
N.I.I.O.E.

POR LA MEMORIA, LA VERDAD Y LA JUSTICIA

¿DÓNDE ESTÁN?



Ana María
N.I.I.O.E.

POR LA MEMORIA, LA VERDAD Y LA JUSTICIA

UN EJEMPLO PARA NUESTROS PAÍSES



Ana María
N.I.I.O.E.

POR LA MEMORIA, LA VERDAD Y LA JUSTICIA

Mi nombre es Ivan Ernesto Gonzales Fuentes



MI NOMBRE ES IVAN ERNESTO GONZALEZ FUENTES. SOY GUATEMALTECO Y TENGO 35 AÑOS. FUI DETENIDO EL 15 DE MARZO DE 1982 POR EL REGIMEN MILITAR Y DESAPARECIDO. HASTA AHORA NO SE SEPA NADA DE MI PARadero. RECLAMO MEMORIA, VERDAD Y JUSTICIA.



Joaquin Uscap
Nacido el 10 de mayo de 1945

NI OLVIDO, NI PERDON



Jorge Olivas, Murofres García
desaparecido el 15-03-1982

MI NOMBRE ES JORGE OLIVAS, MUROFRES GARCÍA. SOY GUATEMALTECO Y TENGO 45 AÑOS. FUI DETENIDO EL 15 DE MARZO DE 1982 POR EL REGIMEN MILITAR Y DESAPARECIDO. HASTA AHORA NO SE SEPA NADA DE MI PARadero. RECLAMO MEMORIA, VERDAD Y JUSTICIA.

MEMORIA, VERDAD Y JUSTICIA

¿DÓNDE ESTÁN?



Jorge Olivas
N.I.I.O.E.

POR LA MEMORIA, LA VERDAD Y LA JUSTICIA

¿DÓNDE ESTÁN?



Jorge Olivas
N.I.I.O.E.

POR LA MEMORIA, LA VERDAD Y LA JUSTICIA



MI NOMBRE ES JOAQUIN USCAP. SOY GUATEMALTECO Y TENGO 45 AÑOS. FUI DETENIDO EL 15 DE MARZO DE 1982 POR EL REGIMEN MILITAR Y DESAPARECIDO. HASTA AHORA NO SE SEPA NADA DE MI PARadero. RECLAMO MEMORIA, VERDAD Y JUSTICIA.



MI NOMBRE ES JORGE OLIVAS, MUROFRES GARCÍA. SOY GUATEMALTECO Y TENGO 45 AÑOS. FUI DETENIDO EL 15 DE MARZO DE 1982 POR EL REGIMEN MILITAR Y DESAPARECIDO. HASTA AHORA NO SE SEPA NADA DE MI PARadero. RECLAMO MEMORIA, VERDAD Y JUSTICIA.

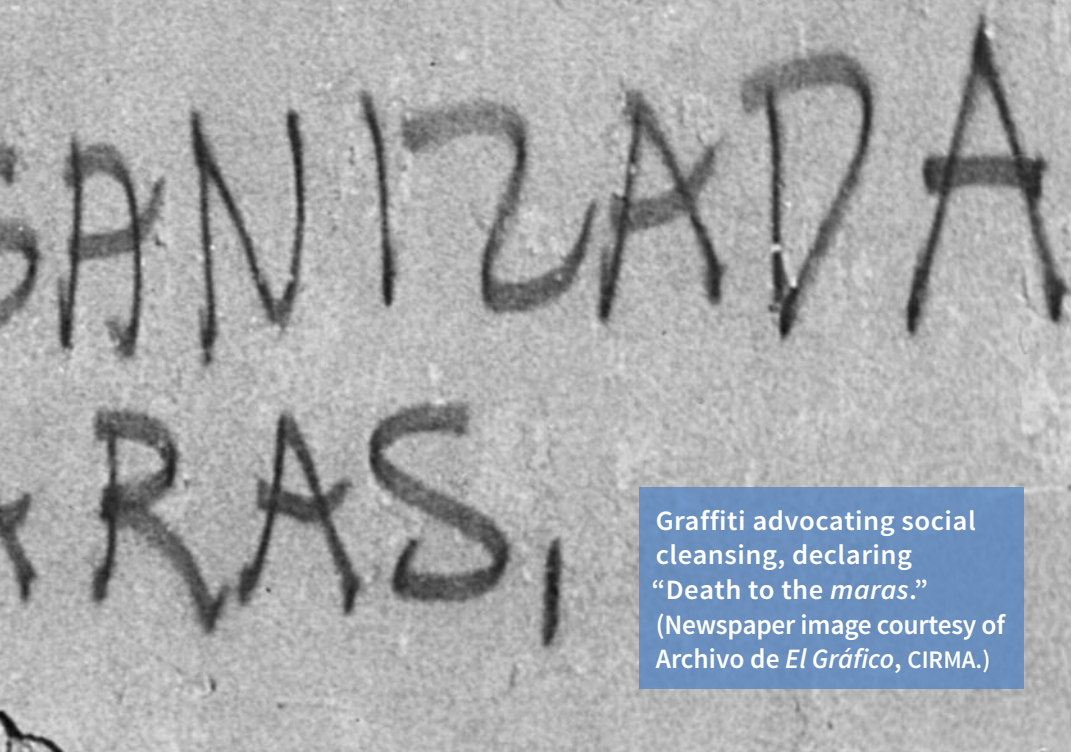




Friday, July 5, 2013

THE Foundation for the Development of Guatemala – FUNDESA is its Spanish acronym – does all it can to attract investors, but the enterprise admits that its own registers of public security (or lack thereof) make the country a hard sell. In 1995, before the signing of the peace accord, FUNDESA recorded the homicide rate in Guatemala at 33.8 for every 100,000 inhabitants. It currently estimates the figure at 32.3 (Canada's in 2011 was 1.62, a 44-year low). In 2006, the tenth anniversary of the peace accord, the index was actually higher than the pre-accord figure – 46.3 murders for every 100,000 inhabitants. Most violent deaths are never investigated, let alone brought before the courts.

Mauricio López Bonilla, the Minister of the Interior, explains in the *Prensa Libre* that the period 2004–2008, under the presidency of Oscar Berger, saw not only the army reduced in size but the police force too, the latter's "less professional training" and its loss of "civil intelligence staffing" compromising its operations further. The army and the police, López Bonilla implies, are no match for organized crime, be it drug cartels from Mexico that orchestrate the transfer of cocaine from Colombia to the United States or the local gangs, known as *maras*, recruited for a range of



Graffiti advocating social cleansing, declaring “Death to the *maras*.”
(Newspaper image courtesy of Archivo de El Gráfico, CIRMA.)

middleman activities, from extortion and intimidation to ensuring safe passage and settling scores.

Canadian Adam Blackwell, the newspaper *El Periódico* reports, is the secretary of a branch of the Organization of American States called “Multidimensional Security.” Amidst talk of decriminalizing the drug business writ large – Guatemalans and other Latin Americans, President Pérez Molina points out, are the ones who pay the highest price for what is overwhelmingly a US habit – Blackwell’s job entails decriminalizing one aspect of it, the existence and role of the *maras*. He is credited with brokering deals in neighbouring El Salvador and Honduras that have seen rival gangs in both countries cease animosities amongst themselves and enter a pact agreed to by government that integrates the delinquents back into society. “Without talking with them,” Blackwell states firmly, “it will be very difficult to lower the number of homicides in Guatemala,” which he puts at twice the number cited by FUNDESA, a chilling 95 for every 100,000 inhabitants. “We are still unclear,” he adds, “whether or not the government of Guatemala wishes to embark on a process similar to that of El Salvador and Honduras. The message that I am getting from gang leaders is that a deal might be possible.” Since Blackwell’s successful negotiations in El Salvador, homicides there, according to the national police, have dropped by one third.

Sunday, July 7, 2013

GEOGRAPHY is fundamentally what Central America is about. Just as the isthmus is today a corridor that connects areas of high demand for drugs with regions of ready supply, so too historically is what Pablo Neruda called “the sweet waist of America” a narrow strip of land that separates the world’s two great oceans.

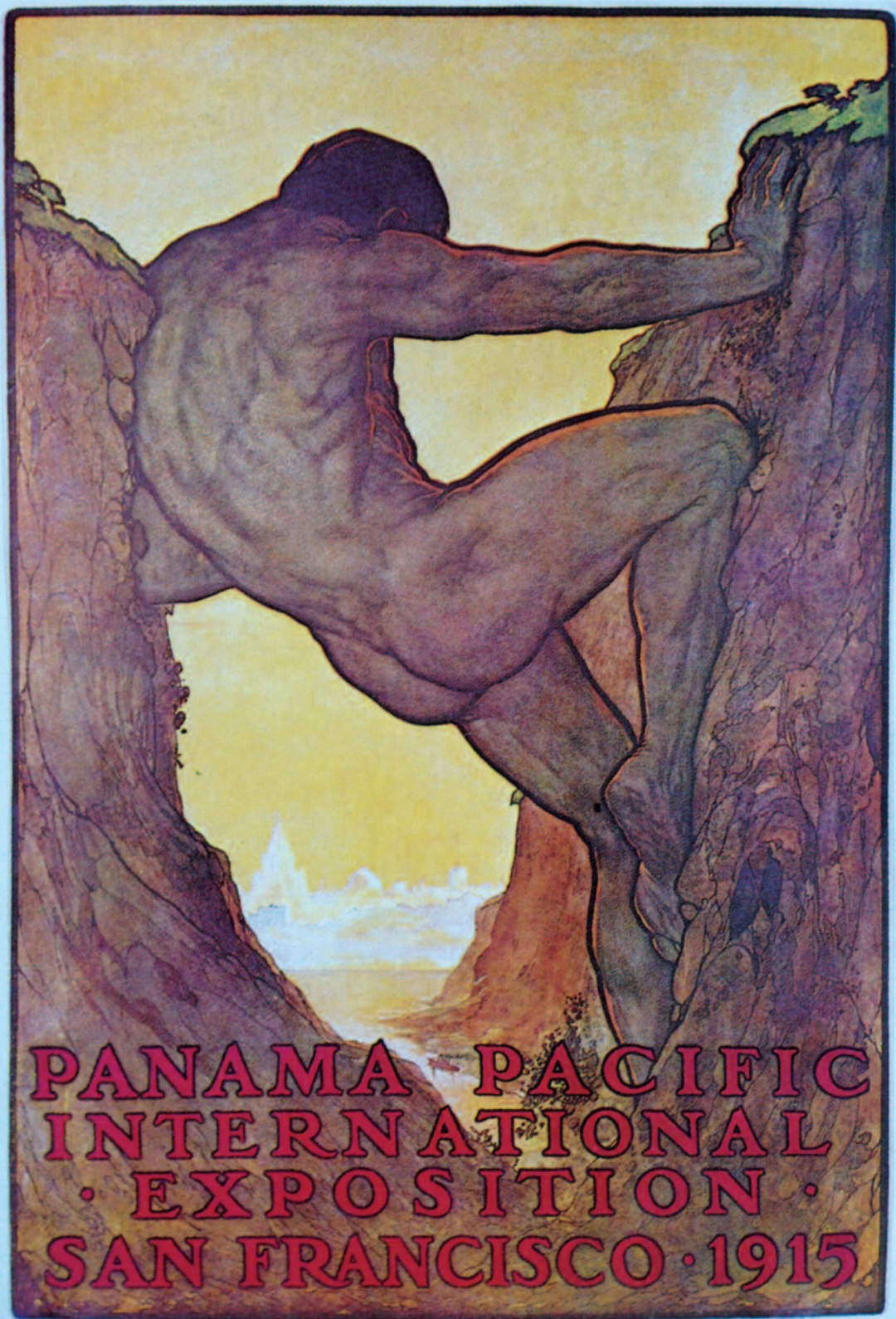
Finding ways to link the Atlantic and the Pacific, and facilitate trade between them, has been the goal of fortune seekers ever since Vasco Núñez de Balboa (not “stout Cortez,” as John Keats erroneously put it) stood “silent, upon a peak in Darien” five centuries ago, the first European credited with having trekked from the Atlantic littoral to contemplate the Pacific. No one has captured a sense of Central America’s geopolitical des-

tiny better than William Paterson, the financier whose advocacy of the isthmus as a strategic hub during Scotland’s disastrous attempts to colonize the Darién region of Panama in the late seventeenth century is enshrined in his describing it as “the door of the seas, and the key of the universe.”

Up until 1890, Nicaragua was the preferred choice of the United States as the country through which to finance the construction of an interoceanic canal. Panama won out in the end; since August 15, 1914, ships have plied its 80-kilometre-long double set of locks, built at a cost of \$639 million and 20,000 working lives. To accom-

modate the volume of traffic – 14,000 freighters passed through the Panama Canal in 2012 – a third set of locks is now under construction. The *Prensa Libre*, however, notes that Nicaragua, with Chinese backing, is again promoting its territory as an alternative route, with a joint venture also championed between El Salvador and Honduras. Guatemala has its own ambitious project, a “dry canal” constituting two highways and a railroad between Puerto Barrios on the Atlantic and Puerto San Luis on the Pacific, the estimated cost of traversing 372 kilometres of terrain some five billion dollars.

“Up until 1890, Nicaragua was the preferred choice of the United States as the country through which to finance the construction of an interoceanic canal. Panama won out in the end; since August 15, 1914, ships have plied its 80-kilometre-long double set of locks, built at a cost of \$639 million and 20,000 working lives.”



PANAMA PACIFIC
INTERNATIONAL
· EXPOSITION ·
SAN FRANCISCO · 1915

Saturday, July 13, and Sunday, July 14, 2013

ON TWO CONSECUTIVE DAYS, *Prensa Libre* devotes prime coverage to the aftermath of a television broadcast made by President Pérez Molina on July 9, in which he proposed that a two-year moratorium be placed on the granting of new licences for mining. The business elite, predictably, is opposed to such a proposal, and takes a dim view of Pérez Molina's pointed words about its attitudes and behaviour. Ecologically minded groups like Colectivo MadreSelva call either for a total suspension or genuine, meaningful consultation before mining operations begin.

Guatemala at present has 107 mines in production, with applications to open 359 more. Foreign companies are lured to Guatemala because of favourable concessions granted them that, in effect, flout environmental and legal legislation, generating intense conflict in communities whose land lies closest to, or indeed forms part of, on-the-ground operations carried out by subsidiaries. Canadian companies are in the forefront of investment. In the words of Alain Deneault and William Sacher, authors of *Imperial Canada Inc.: Legal Haven of Choice for the World's Mining Industries* (2010), "Canada stands out as a judicial and financial haven that shelters its mining industry from the political or legal consequences of its extraterritorial activities by providing a lax domestic regulatory structure that it seeks to export through international agencies, diplomatic channels, and economic development projects."

Not, at least by one ruling, for much longer. Far from the scene of turmoil that saw murder and rape take place at its former site in El Estor, Toronto-based Hudbay Minerals has been summoned by Ontario Superior Court Justice Carole Brown to stand trial in Canada for alleged abuses of human rights committed by its affiliates, HMI Nickel Inc. and the Compañía Guatemalteca de Niquel, in Guatemala in 2007 and 2009. "Will Canadian companies be held responsible for their actions abroad?" an op-ed piece in the *Globe and Mail* asked after Justice Brown's landmark ruling on July 22. The question hovers, but a precedent has been set, one that reverberates in the hitherto cocoon realm of corporate Canada. Murray Klippenstein, a lawyer representing indigenous Q'eqchi' Mayas whose lives and livelihoods have been adversely affected by Hudbay's actions, puts it succinctly: "There will now be a trial regarding the abuses that were committed in Guatemala, and this trial will be in a courtroom in Canada, a few blocks from Hudbay's headquarters, exactly where it belongs." Mr Klippenstein adds: "We would never tolerate these abuses in Canada, and Canadian companies should not be able to take advantage of broken-down or extremely weak legal systems in other countries to get away with them there."

The Marlin gold mine, in
San Marcos, Guatemala.



MY VISIT TO GUATEMALA ends with my attending a conference at which a forum on Canadian mining activities sparks lively debate among participants. During her presentation, one of my graduate students, reporting on the preliminary findings of dogged fieldwork, informs the audience that a new Canadian company recently awarded a licence is called Gunpoint Exploration. “*Nomina sunt consequentia rerum* – Names are the consequences of things,” runs a line in Dante’s *La Vita Nuova* (1295).

The poet has spoken.

W. GEORGE LOVELL, recently elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, is Professor of Geography at Queen’s University and Visiting Professor in Latin American History at Universidad Pablo de Olavide in Seville, Spain. He has twelve book titles to his credit, among them *A Beauty That Hurts: Life and Death in Guatemala* (2010), now in its third edition. 