

# Inter Pares

BULLETIN

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## Human Values, Human Rights



Larry Towell

Early last October, Guatemalan soldiers opened up with automatic rifles on villagers in the small community of *Aurora 8 de Octubre*, in a remote north-eastern municipality of the department of Alta Vera Paz. Eleven villagers were left dead and thirty wounded. The incident was a grim echo of years of military terror and slaughter that saw thousands of rural people die and tens of thousands flee the country in the 1980's.

The community of *Aurora 8 de Octubre* is made up of former refugees who returned from Mexico just one year ago and were celebrating the anniversary of their return, after which they had named their community. Their exile and eventual long journey back home had been assisted by many Canadian humanitarian organizations, including Inter Pares. At the time of the massacre we were supporting the women in the community in their efforts to organize and work together to rebuild their lives.

The news of the massacre was disheartening for those who have worked with the refugees for so long. But there was also in the response to this incident

an indication of the progress made in human rights protection in Guatemala. Even ten years ago it was impossible to get international attention about incidents such as this, incidents even more horrific in their scale and terror. The relentless slaughter of Mayan peasants was carried out with impunity in spite of tireless advocacy by the humanitarian community in Canada and elsewhere. But after years of these efforts, and the courageous struggle of the Guatemalan people, massacres are increasingly rare, and it is impossible for such incidents to occur in secret.

On this occasion national and international attention was galvanized within hours of the massacre. Helicopters were dispatched by the United Nations and Red Cross to evacuate the wounded. The President of Guatemala found it necessary to make a national television appearance to admit the role of the military, and within days the Minister of Defence was forced to resign.

The progress that has been made is the result of international financial and political support to local efforts to break

down isolation and individual vulnerability to the abuses of government and military authorities. And it is the result of more effective international networks that have been built over several years to defend the lives and liberty of those who lead the struggle for human rights in various countries. Governments everywhere have been served notice that violence and repression will not go unnoticed in the international community. Equally important, it is much more difficult for major powers such as the United States to continue to support repressive regimes, as happened with Guatemala for years.

While this incident demonstrates how much has been achieved over the past decade, it is also a cruel reminder of how much remains to be done. The first principles of human rights are universality and reciprocity. Human rights are not merely codes to minimize the injustice done to individuals by the state. Rights are privileges and responsibilities determined mutually and shared universally within society: honoured, protected and defended by society in the name of all members. Rights will be enjoyed by all citizens only when they emerge from shared values – most particularly the dignity and integrity of the individual – that are constantly renewed within an explicit social covenant among citizens.

Human rights are participatory in their essence, and depend on active and dynamic democratic institutions for their existence and survival. Without democracy, there are no rights, only arbitrary privileges and restrictive laws, enacted and executed by a governing elite.

This *Bulletin* explores examples of how the action that Inter Pares supports in various countries around the world is based on this understanding of human rights, and nurtures the capacity of people to participate in defining and advocating one common standard of dignity and opportunity for all citizens.

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## Mexico: *Citizen Action for Democracy*

Mexico is undergoing a fundamental and painful transformation as the country struggles to adapt to the global economy. NAFTA was signed with promises of economic revitalization and democratic opening. But as the government abandoned policies that encouraged national industrial development, and lifted financial regulations, thousands were thrown out of work or off their land. And changes in Mexico's anti-democratic and corrupt political culture have yet to be achieved. The process is blocked by certain sectors of the traditional elite who violently resist genuine reforms which could bring about respect for human rights and democracy.

Since 1929, Mexico has operated virtually as a centralized, one-party state where the ruling party controls all branches and levels of government. It has also co-opted a significant portion of the leadership of the labour movement, earning Mexico the reputation of being the "perfect dictatorship". To retain power, the party has resorted to massive electoral fraud, including buying votes, manipulation of electoral results, intimidation and murder. NAFTA has con-



Roch Tassé

tributed very little to ease these practices in spite of assurances by Canadian and U.S. leaders.

Only a profound change in this political culture can lead to genuine democratization. To promote such change, over 400 Mexican NGOs and popular organizations joined forces in

1993 to create the Civic Alliance. This nation-wide coalition aims to strengthen participation in the democratization process and defend the vote of Mexicans through civic education programs and campaigns, election monitoring and the public denunciation of electoral fraud. The Civic Alliance also advocates for fundamental electoral reforms, the separation of the party and the state, and the democratization of mass media.

The Civic Alliance has already achieved a reputation of professionalism and political objectivity which, combined with its capacity to reach out and mobilize citizens, makes it one of the most credible voices advocating democratization. As a result, the Alliance has been able not only to monitor formal elections, but also to organize popular referenda on issues of national interest such as the Chiapas peace process or alternative economic models for Mexico. Inter Pares provides financial assistance to the Civic Alliance to support these initiatives, and to help it carry out strategic planning for the upcoming 1997 Congressional elections.

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## Bangladesh: *Making a Difference*

Several months ago, a long-time colleague of Inter Pares was arrested and imprisoned without charge in Bangladesh. Farhad Mazhar, prominent poet, journalist and activist working for the social justice organization UBINIG, was arrested after writing an article critical of the government. Farhad was detained under the Special Powers Act, a law retained on the books by the government elected in 1992 after the collapse of the military dictatorship. Authorities justified the use of this repressive law by saying that Farhad was engaged in activities prejudicial to the interests of the State.

Condemnation of the arrest was swift, both in Bangladesh and interna-

tionally. The independent Bangladesh media argued that the arrest was a serious breach of freedom of expression, guaranteed under the Constitution. Human rights, development and church organizations, as well as environmental and writers' groups around the world, issued strong protests. In Canada, Inter Pares co-ordinated a solidarity campaign across the country.

After 30 days of detention in Dhaka Central Jail, Farhad was released. Upon hearing a writ of *Habeas Corpus*, the Bangladesh High Court honoured the Constitution and ruled that the arrest and detention had been illegal.

For thousands of people in Bangladesh, Farhad has become

a symbol of courage and resistance in the face of arbitrary power. His arrest and detention sparked a widespread public debate about the need for a Parliamentary review of anti-democratic laws that remain in force. This is a positive sign that the people of Bangladesh want to complete the transition to a democratic and accountable state.

Democracy cannot flourish when governments attempt to silence dissent through repression. And democracy can become meaningful only when people like Farhad Mazhar are able to participate in its creation and protection.

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## Trade & Human Rights: *A Policy of Silence*

When some of the delegates to the United Nations International Conference on Women in Beijing last September demonstrated solidarity with the cause of freedom and equality for Chinese women – and *all* human rights activists in China – Chinese security agents disrupted their demonstrations. Without irony, UN authorities asked the delegates to be patient and understanding – by Chinese “standards” the security forces were polite and restrained, tolerating behaviour from the international delegates that they would never tolerate from Chinese citizens themselves.

The rationale that “local standards” vary has become a common official excuse for tolerating the abuse of human rights. In spite of public declarations that Canada’s foreign policy is built on the two pillars of trade *and* human rights, the Canadian government has refused to allow the human rights performance of specific countries to interfere with its priority of trade promotion. Canadians are constantly told that we have to respect local differences, and “quietly” support gradual improvement by building economic

links. This contradiction has been most clear in regard to three countries: Mexico, Indonesia, and China.

As part of its promotion of trade with Mexico, Canada has carefully avoided public acknowledgement of the abuse of human rights in that country, which is currently experiencing one of the highest levels of political violence and judicial impunity in the Americas. Economic ties with Indonesia have kept Canada silent on Indonesia’s ruthless repression of internal opposition and its vicious occupation of East Timor. And last October during the visit to Canada of Premier Li Peng, the man most responsible for the 1989 massacre during the demonstrations at Tiananmen Square, Canadian leaders once again refused to publicly condemn China’s human rights record, and officials carefully protected Li Peng from exposure to Canadian demonstrators.

Yet the case of Guatemala suggests that Canada *can* lead in promoting human rights when it chooses. Beginning in the early 1990s with the strong leadership of former ambassador, Brian Dickson, the Canadian government played an important role in building international support for the

Guatemalan human rights movement in its struggle to end political violence and repression. Ambassador Dickson was allowed to take a strong public stand on repression in Guatemala, and worked closely with Canadian organizations that supported human rights activists and representatives of Guatemalan refugees and displaced people. Why would Canada carry out such a role in Guatemala, but not in Mexico, its immediate neighbour to the north? The only apparent factors are economic interest and political courage.

Edward Broadbent, President of Canada’s International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, was clear in his criticism of the Canadian government’s refusal to publicly comment on human rights during Li Peng’s visit, pointing out that if Canada’s moral commitment to human rights is truly equal to its economic interest in increased trade, it has no choice but to link the two priorities.

In not doing so – in *not* speaking out – our actions speak for us. Canada’s actions seem to say to the world that human rights, and international moral leadership, are no longer at the heart of what Canada is in the world.

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## Zimbabwe: *The Right to Livelihood*

Increasing homelessness in Zimbabwe is an indication that the social fabric of rural communities is disintegrating. Small farmers on communal land face unfair pricing, threats and even murder as national and local government authorities, with the backing of large landholders, force them to convert from subsistence to export farming. Intimidated and hungry, families are forced off the land and migrate to cities such as Harare and Bulawayo looking for a livelihood and some measure of safety.

The situation of these homeless migrants in urban areas is difficult. Services are limited and there is little affordable housing. They make

their shelter wherever they can – on streets or near railway lines – and are constantly threatened with forceable removal and harassment by government authorities.

ZimRights, a Zimbabwean voluntary organization, works with the homeless in and around Harare to improve their situation and promote their rights. The organization does this through a program that combines human rights with economic, social and civic education. Through the years, ZimRights has learned that human rights knowledge and advocacy skills must go hand in hand with tools to assist the homeless in economic empowerment.

With assistance from Inter Pares, ZimRights provides training in functional literacy and supports people to develop, finance and manage collective ventures. Through small scale credit programs, ZimRights supports people to create their own self-employment opportunities. And workshops in legal rights allow the homeless to gain awareness and understanding of their rights, and to use the law to protect themselves.

Through this program, ZimRights has demonstrated that the homeless, with appropriate support, can defend their rights and change the circumstances of their lives.

# The Karen of Burma: *Without Home or Homeland*

*For several years, Inter Pares has been supporting health programs for Burmese refugees who have fled across the border into Thailand. Inter Pares staff member Peter Gillespie recently returned from a visit to the border region. The following is an excerpt from his report.*

It takes us an hour to drive through the mountain jungle from the little town of Mae Sot, on the border of Thailand and Myanmar (Burma), to the Mae La Refugee Camp. Almost 11,000 Karen people live in this sprawling and isolated camp. Mae La was originally established in 1986, but was re-located to this remote area several years ago in order to be out of shelling range of Myanmar artillery.

Mae La is one of more than 20 Karen refugee camps scattered along the border region inside Thailand. The Karen, the second largest of the ethnic hill tribes who live in the mountains of Myanmar, have been fighting for independence since 1949. In recent years, the conflict has displaced tens of thousands of Karen and other ethnic hill people. Today, there are more than 100,000 refugees living in squalid camps in Thailand.

For many years, the civil war here was conducted primarily by ethnic insurgents seeking autonomy. The war took a new turn in 1988 when Burma's democracy movement took to the streets of Rangoon to demand democracy. The movement was brutally crushed and thousands of students and democracy activists were killed or imprisoned. Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the National League for Democracy, was placed under house arrest. Many Burmese people fled the country to join the ethnic peoples as refugees in Thailand.

As we walk through the muddy pathways of Mae La, I am told that the camp is under strain. In the past month, 5,000 new refugees have arrived here from other border camps that have been attacked and burned by the Myanmar army. Housing and sanitation facilities are being hurriedly constructed, but building materials are in short supply. Now the rains have begun and there has been an outbreak of dysentery and cholera. Medical officials say that the



Peter Gillespie

cholera is under control, but are worried that they cannot cope with so many new arrivals.

Before leaving Mae La Camp, we are invited to share tea with the Director of the Karen Refugee Committee. He describes the work of the Refugee Committee in developing schools, health and economic programs in the refugee camps. "We are tired of war and want to go home," he tells me. "But until our security is guaranteed, until there is peace, we cannot go home."

And so the refugee crisis persists and an entire generation of young Karen are growing up in refugee camps. They are not allowed to leave the camps to find work or to study in Thailand, and they cannot go home. For now the Karen are a people in limbo, without home or homeland. Until real democracy and human rights are secured and defended in Burma, their struggle and that of the Burmese people will continue.

## Women's Rights to Health

Inter Pares is working with a committee of Canadian women's organizations, with input from other women in the North and South, to develop a reproductive "Bill of Rights".

The "Bill of Rights" grows out of a 1994 Canadian Women's Report, which took a critical look at Canada's domestic and foreign policies in the areas of population control and family planning. The Report, produced by the Canadian Women's Committee, was widely distributed to media, government and non-governmental organizations prior to and during the Cairo Population and Development conference and Beijing Women's conference.

The "Bill of Rights" will build on the policy recommendations of the Canadian Women's Report and offer practical guidelines for contraceptive research, development, testing and distribution. It is based on the need for a re-orientation of contraceptive research and development that puts women's health first. When completed, it will be a valuable tool for education and advocacy on women's health rights. It will be available in the Spring of 1996.

Those interested in critical perspectives on international human rights are invited to subscribe to ***Together for Human Rights***, a newsletter to promote increased human rights information and advocacy. For information contact Kathleen Ruff RR#2 Burns Lake, BC, V0J 1E0, phone/fax (604) 695-6545.

