

# Inter Pares

B U L L E T I N

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## Defending Truth: The Courage of Witness

*The struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.*

Milan Kundera (The Book of Laughter and Forgetting)

On 27 October of last year, a long-time friend of Inter Pares, Sergio Aguayo, was subject to a very public death threat — received through a major Mexican newspaper — for his relentless advocacy for civic freedom and human rights in Mexico. Along with Sergio, the message condemned colleagues Miguel Sarre, Edgar Cortéz, Juan Antonio Vega, and Fernando Ruiz.

The threat was not taken lightly, since a week earlier renowned human rights lawyer Digna Ochoa y Plácido had been executed in her office in Mexico City by killers who left a note condemning her advocacy on behalf of “terrorists” and enemies of the state, and warning other human rights advocates that the same fate awaited them. Sergio Aguayo and his colleagues were forthright in their condemnation of the murder, openly demanding a public investigation. Now the lives of Sergio and his colleagues too are on the line.

Such events are not isolated to Mexico, but happen around the world daily. One week earlier, Matilde González Izás of the investigative unit of AVANCSO in Guatemala, also a long-time friend of Inter Pares, was threatened with death, and all of her electronic equipment and research files stolen from her office. Her crime? Matilde is documenting the ominous resurgence in the Guatemalan highlands of the vigilante committees that acted on behalf of the Guatemalan military during its murderous scorched-earth campaign of the 1980s. The threat against Matilde brought back the cruel memory of the assassination twelve years earlier — on September 11, 1990 — of Myrna Mack Chang, her

predecessor in this research within AVANCSO.

Why are people like Sergio Aguayo and Matilde González such a threat to sinister men with guns and money and influence — men who appear to have far more power than could ever be mustered by Matilde, Sergio and all of their sisters and brothers promoting truth and justice around the world? It is because power is based on lies, and even the most absolute power is threatened when lies are revealed, and when the truth looms larger in people’s minds and hearts than the fear that has been engendered by lies.

The most important tool of oppression is control of information. Civil control is buttressed everywhere by national myth, government lies

without contest even before debate begins.

Against propaganda, power, and impunity around the world, are aligned millions of active citizens who see themselves as “witnesses” for peace, for dignity, for justice and self-determination. They bear witness to the lived experience of themselves, their families and their communities. They bear witness to the crimes that have been committed against them and others, and demand that those who are responsible, be held responsible.

Their weapon is courage. Their banner is truth.

Against indoctrination, they educate. To counter official justification, they offer dissent and public critique. To reveal what has been made obscure,

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and political subterfuge. When myth is challenged, lies exposed, and subterfuge revealed, power reverts to threats, violence and coercion. That is, when power is threatened, the powerful often revert to terror.

Propaganda is pervasive. Propaganda does not merely infuse official discourse; it forms the discourse. Propaganda is the water in which the common lies and daily deceits of political life swim and feed. Its function is fourfold: to indoctrinate, to justify, to obscure, to motivate citizens to conform and obey. Propaganda sets the public agenda and the terms of discussion: the biggest lies prevail

they illuminate history through their own stories and those of their communities. To motivate, they engage in citizen action and advocacy to hold governments and their military accomplices accountable.

When people bear witness, they offend power. When they illuminate history, they become dangerous. When they engage, they are seen as a threat to order. Inter Pares accompanies people who bear witness to their own history, to ensure that this history is not repeated, and that a new and more humane history can be written. This newsletter illustrates examples of this kind of action by our counterparts.

# Never Again: Truth and Reconciliation in Peru

*The Commission believes that justice and national reconciliation ... will only be possible by establishing and publicly stating the truth. A just and democratic society cannot be built on a foundation of lies or guilty silence.*

Statement of the Peru Truth and Reconciliation Commission, November 11, 2001.

Diana Avila, a Peruvian, is the Executive Director of Project Counselling Service (PCS), Inter Pares' long-time counterpart in Latin America. Through the PCS, Diana worked closely with Guatemalans who participated in the commission of inquiry — the “truth commission” — that uncovered the facts of the war that took place in Guatemala during the 1970s and 1980s. Now that Peru itself has established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Diana has undertaken to share with grassroots organizations and human rights activists the experiences of her colleagues in Guatemala, to learn from them, and to help prepare for the work ahead.

Over the past two decades, Peruvians experienced intense political violence

and repression. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, at least 600,000 people were displaced. Another 26,000 people were killed, and more than 6,000 “disappeared”. Over 3,000 individuals were jailed — among them human rights workers, teachers, and unionists — after secret trials in which the accused were not allowed to see the evidence against them. Thousands more were named — often under torture — as “terrorists”, and were then subject to arrest. The victims of the war were overwhelmingly indigenous people, Quechua-speaking, and poor.

Successive governments targeted anyone expressing dissent. When Peruvian human rights organizations called for a national peace process, they were accused

by the government of having “terrorist sympathies”. And so the inequity, injustice and abuse of power that fed the war remained outside the realm of public discussion.

After the Fujimori regime collapsed in late 2000, the transitional government that took over to organize new elections acceded to overwhelming public demand to understand and expose what had happened in their country. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established to investigate the violence of the guerrillas, and the response of successive Peruvian governments, including the corruption, impunity and abuse of power that became the norm of state officials during the authoritarian Fujimori regime.

Diana tells us that although there are organizations of internally displaced people, relatives of the disappeared, and other victims of political violence, they are still afraid to talk about what happened to them, their families and their communities. There has been no real peace process; violence and fear persist, especially in the rural areas in which PCS works. And there is no support available for people who decide to give testimony — testimony which will inevitably re-awaken long-buried pain and grief.

“We learned in Guatemala what it means for people to give such painful testimony, and of the need to provide care and counselling as people make their decision whether and how to tell their stories. And we know that there has never been a successful Truth Commission process without the participation of organized people — grass-roots, human rights, women’s and peasant organizations,” Diana says.

Diana and PCS will bring people together to learn from one another, to connect the new human rights committees to national actors, to provide training in counselling and mental health, and especially to ensure that peasant women and others from the war-affected zones have the opportunity to tell their stories and make known the truth of what happened in their towns and villages.

As Diana says, “So that we really know what it means when we say ‘*Nunca mas*’ — Never again!”

## Third World Network

The images presented by mainstream media form our understanding of the world and are the basis of the day-to-day construction of history. But these images often reveal a distorted reality. Reality is complex, shaped by individuals, cultures, countries, and made up of entangled histories and experiences. In today’s globalized world, information is an essential tool for people to participate meaningfully, and to create a more inclusive world.

Third World Network (TWN) was created to bring voices from the South to international fora on development and North-South relations. By bringing together journalists, economists, researchers and civil society groups from many countries, TWN seeks to better articulate the needs and interests of the people of the Third World, especially the most marginalized social groups. TWN promotes development that fulfils human needs, and more equitable distribution of world resources. With a secretariat in Penang, Malaysia, and offices in India, Uruguay, England, Switzerland and Ghana, TWN has developed relationships of common cause with many organizations in the South and the North, including

in Canada. Inter Pares has been collaborating with TWN-Malaysia and TWN-Africa for many years.

TWN produces a number of publications that are distributed internationally. The monthly magazine *Third World Resurgence* provides perspectives and analysis on social, economic and environmental issues related to the South, as seen by Southern journalists and researchers. TWN also produces “features” on various topics such as development, economy, finance, human rights, environment, culture, and development policies. This feature service is distributed to over 200 newspapers, magazines and organizations around the world. TWN-Africa provides an African perspective through the publication of the magazine *African Agenda*.

Through their publications TWN highlights the reality of the day-to-day life of people whose voices are rarely heard through the static of clichés and immediate events.

For subscriptions, information, and details about TWN, please consult the web sites: <http://www.twinside.org.sg>, and <http://www.twnafrica.org>

## Bearing Witness in Burma

When Kevin Heppner of Milford, Ontario set out to see the world in 1989, he had no idea that he would be gone for so long. Twelve years later, Kevin lives in Thailand and is the director of the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), an organization that documents the atrocities the Burmese army has inflicted on people living in Burma's Karen State.

When Kevin arrived in Thailand in 1990 he met some volunteers working in refugee camps along Thailand's border with Burma. Kevin visited some of these camps and decided to volunteer himself. He was assigned to teach in a village in Karen State inside Burma. He enjoyed it so much that he committed to teaching for a year before continuing his journey.

But Kevin's plans abruptly changed in 1991 when the Burmese military bombed and then shelled the village where he was living. Kevin and his students, along with surviving villagers, fled to Thailand. Kevin had heard many stories of what it was like to be a refugee; now he became a firsthand witness to that experience.

Kevin made his way to Manerplaw, the headquarters of the Karen people in Burma's Karen state. There he encountered people who had suffered terrible abuses at the hands of the Burmese military – people who had been burned out of their villages, who had family members tortured or summarily executed, who had been forced to be porters and carry military supplies through the mountains. Kevin tried to interest international journalists in these people. "But nobody was interested," Kevin says. "Journalists were only interested in the people with guns."

Kevin decided to document these stories himself. Armed with a typewriter and carbon paper, Kevin interviewed displaced people and wrote down their stories. Over time, he created an international mailing list and sent these documents around the world. He recruited several people to help him and they called themselves the Karen Human Rights Group.

In 1995, Manerplaw was attacked and overrun by the Burmese army. Once again Kevin became a refugee, fleeing along with 20,000 other people to the border with Thailand. Kevin set up a small office in the town of Mae Sot, Thailand. He and his colleagues continued their work, often travelling for

weeks through remote jungle regions inside Burma with camera and tape recorder to reach displaced people.

Over the years, KHRG's documentation work has provided key evidence to international human rights groups, governments and UN agencies. The KHRG provided crucial evidence to the recent International Labour Organization's investigation of forced labour in Burma, resulting in an unprecedented condemnatory report. The ILO report has had an enormous impact on the Burmese junta, forcing it to pass legislation banning forced labour.

This strategy of documentation and dissemination is being duplicated by other groups in Burma reporting on human rights in other regions. Despite the military junta's attempts to prevent it, today there is credible information emerging from Burma showing the extent of human rights atrocities. International



*Kevin Heppner of KHRG*

recognition of the crisis in Burma is in no small part due to the courage and determination of Kevin and his colleagues to bear witness, on behalf of us all.

(The Karen Human Rights Group web site can be found at [www.khrg.org](http://www.khrg.org)).

## Reading Between the Lines

*In Burma, people grow up reading between the lines.*

Christina Fink, Author of *Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule*

Burma is among the most censored nations in the world. There are no independent media outlets or publications; no films untouched by the watchful eye of the military junta; no artistic performances that might be deemed anti-government. In Burma, there are only state-sanctioned newspapers, and television stations that show soldiers marching, and ribbon-cutting events attended by top generals. Access to the internet is nonexistent. Burma's most prominent journalists are living in exile – or in prison.

People who live in Burma will often tell foreign visitors, "you know more than we do" about significant political events that take place within the country. Not only is information tightly-controlled, the dictatorship expounds its version of events at every opportunity.

Even as the dictatorship tries to suppress the truth, people find ways to expose it. Truth lives through those who organize themselves to report and document human rights violations, through those that publish and disseminate this information inside Burma and

internationally, and through the majority of the citizens of Burma who are well aware of the junta's hypocrisy and propaganda.

For many years, Inter Pares has supported news and information groups from Burma in their efforts to provide people access to an uncensored view of politics, the economy and human rights. With great courage, these individuals investigate the lived experience of people in Burma's most militarized areas. Such information is essential for the pro-democracy movement and the international community to make informed political decisions. Much of this information also provides the basis for radio programs, broadcast into Burma from outside, an accessible form of independent information that cannot be intercepted by the junta.

In Burma, as in most places Inter Pares works, there are people who know they have an obligation to seek truth and to act on what they know. Inter Pares will continue to support these people in their efforts to publicly reveal the truth that rests "between the lines".

## Bearing Witness Together

Inter Pares works with people around the world who share our commitment to social justice and peace. By building relationships of common cause we engage with activists, not as the objects of our support but as fellow agents of change. This action for change takes many forms, which we describe in the *Inter Pares Bulletin* throughout the year.

Through the *Bulletin* we bear witness to what we have learned through the rich exchange among people in diverse and often very difficult circumstances, who share a common goal to sustain life and affirm human dignity. We bear witness to what we have seen and heard and felt over the years. And we bear witness to what we know to be true about the world we share.

Inter Pares is able to engage in this action because of the willingness of

thousands of individuals across Canada to bear witness to their own experience and to express their desire for positive change in the world through the work of Inter Pares. We do not take this support for granted. The generosity that our donors have demonstrated for almost three decades makes Inter Pares' work possible. And their trust inspires us and obliges us to bring the insights of that experience into public debates. Because we relate to our donors not as objects of fundraising campaigns, but as fellow citizens who share some common convictions and common dreams, we know we must always bear honest witness regarding the action we take with their support.

Inter Pares donors confirm our belief that most Canadians are not seeking simple solutions for complex problems.

But they do want honest effort. They know that the historical struggle to realize justice and human solidarity is a long one, fraught with setbacks, horror, disappointments and betrayals. They know that the world is not a better place than it was 30 years ago for many people of the global south. Canadians know that if the world is truly to become a better place it will take profound solidarity, significant generosity, and a long-term commitment to support the local action of citizens to assert their rights, guarantee their well-being and security, and participate in shaping their world. This is the commitment that we all make together – to continue learning, sharing and acting with others, among equals. It is a commitment that even as it presents great challenges, continues to sustain us.

## Yew Lee: Activist and Community Organizer

Yew Lee, a community development consultant based in Ottawa, has been an Inter Pares Board member since 1995. He is also active in multicultural education, as well as immigrant and refugee issues. Yew Lee's activism has been influenced by his own family's experiences of discrimination and separation as a result of Canada's racist policies against Chinese people between 1885 and 1947. Yew is now also active in exposing the truth about the Chinese

Head Tax and the Chinese Exclusion Act and in seeking redress for survivors, their spouses and first-generation descendants.

In 1885, Canada introduced a "Head Tax" on Chinese immigrants. Yew Lee's father, Guang-foo Lee, paid \$500 to come to Canada from China in 1913. In the hope of a better life, Guang-foo Lee borrowed money to pay the Head Tax, and spent the next 17 years working off the debt.

In 1923, Canada replaced the Head Tax with the Chinese Exclusion Act which banned new Chinese immigration. In 1930, Guang-foo Lee went back to China to marry, but was prevented from bringing his family to Canada with him because of the Act. He managed to visit them three times in China over the next 20 years. In 1947, Canada repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act and Guang-foo Lee's family – his wife and three children, including Yew Lee – finally joined

him in Sudbury, Ontario in 1950.

Between 1885 and 1923, some 81,000 Chinese immigrants paid \$23 million in head taxes to come to Canada. Very few are still alive. On their behalf, Yew Lee, his mother Quen-ying Lee, and Shack Jang, a man who himself paid the Chinese Head Tax, filed a class-action suit demanding redress for Canada's treatment of Chinese.

Last spring, Justice Cumming of the Ontario Superior Court dismissed the suit stating that the legislation cannot be challenged on either constitutional or international law grounds. However, in his conclusion, he also states that,

*The Chinese Immigration Act, 1885, and its successors have come to symbolize a period of Canadian history scarred by racial intolerance and prejudice... It may very well be that Parliament should consider providing redress for Chinese Canadians.*

Yew Lee, his mother Quen-ying Lee and Shack Jang plan to appeal. "This page of Canadian history will not be turned until the truth is told, and 62 years of anti-Chinese policy is redressed," Yew Lee told us. "For me and many others, it is a family legacy that still needs to be resolved".



Head Tax Certificate of Guang-foo Lee, Yew Lee's father

