

El Salvador/Guatemala: "¿Dónde están los niños?" (Where are the children?)

Date: 18/11/2004

Index: AMR02/001/2004

by Dina Coloma, Researcher with Amnesty International

Imagine your country is at war; imagine you are a child. Imagine your family is facing human rights violations on a daily basis; imagine you are taken away from your parents, brothers and sisters, by the ones who promised to protect you -- imagine you never see your family again.

Hard to imagine? Now think of the reality of hundreds of those children, now young adults, in Guatemala and El Salvador.

In Guatemala between 1978 and 1984, thousands of children "disappeared". Many were taken to military camps and nothing else was ever heard from them. Others escaped to neighbouring countries and, on some occasions, they were sent to orphanages where their mother tongue was not spoken. Their names were changed and they were resettled in other places.

In El Salvador between 1980 and 1991, hundreds of children were assassinated in massacres committed by the armed forces; others were taken after their parents were murdered or after becoming separated from their families during army attacks on their villages. Some were taken to orphanages; others were given up for adoption either within El Salvador or abroad, including the United States, France, Germany and the United Kingdom.

All of them still need support to heal the wounds, to make sense of the past, to see justice for their ordeals, their losses. That is a responsibility for the authorities in each country, not only for the families themselves. The families have done so much up to now; they need support to go on.

Almost two decades later, I had the opportunity to meet some of these children -- now young adults -- who shared a tragic common objective: to know the past in order to face the future.

"It was an unforgettable moment in my life, a moment that changed our lives" -- Andrea Dubón, interviewed in San Salvador on 29 September 2004.

Andrea Dubón is 29 years old, married and the mother of José Vladimir, who was born in 2002. If you meet her for the first time, with no knowledge of her past, you could not imagine the hardships she has been through. She radiates optimism; her smile is contagious; she has so much energy. She is one of over 150 young adults who, as children, "disappeared" during the armed conflict in El Salvador, but who have been "found" and reunited with their biological families in the last few years.

Apart from having a job and a family, she has joined forces with other "found children" and has formed a committee to organize activities. They engage in fundraising and get in touch with other young adults -- children who were separated from their families, adopted by people in other countries. They also work at motivating others to take part in actions aimed at continuing this crucial endeavour.

Andrea was separated from her parents when she was seven, during the so-called "*Guinda de mayo*", an army operation in late May to early June 1982 (*guinda* means running, escaping -- referring to attacks where people were forced to run, escape from their homes and places of residence).

She was taken to a children's home in Santa Tecla along with a group of children. The shock of the experiences she had gone through had caused her to forget everything in her past. However, there was a clear reminder of the events she and her family had been through. During an attack by government forces, airplanes dropped bombs over the village and one exploded near her house. As a result, Andrea lost an arm and had metal fragments in her pelvis and hips, which made it impossible for her to stand up or walk. Eventually, through a painful process of operation, rehabilitation and therapy, she was able to walk again. She also received help for the psychological traumas she suffered.

Andrea spent the next 17 years in Aldeas Infantiles SOS in Santa Tecla. She and other children often wondered about their families and she would dream about being reunited with her family. Her dream finally came true in 1994 when the director of the home told her the news that her parents, brothers and sisters were alive and looking forward to meeting her. The reunion took place later that year -- an event she feels was an unforgettable moment in her life, a moment that changed their lives.

Andrea acknowledges that, had she not been separated from her family and taken to Aldeas, she probably would not have had the opportunity of getting an education. However, she thinks not having the love of her parents and family was a very hard experience because "the family is the most important thing."

In 2002, a book written by five "found children", Andrea among them, was published. "*Historias para tener presente*" is a powerful account of their experience of being caught up in a conflict they were too young to understand, separated from their families and living for years wondering about their roots. It provides first-hand stories that give an invaluable insight into a horrendous period in the history of El Salvador and the damage done to so many innocent people; the thought that all this horror should not have happened.

The authors question the failure of the government to assume responsibility for helping those who have been found and, moreover, to take measures to actively find all those who are still "disappeared".

"I was so sad and distressed. I didn't have anyone to turn to." -- Antonio Imul/Brito Terraza, interviewed in Guatemala on 11 October 2004.

Antonio is 28 years old, but when he was only six years old, his life changed dramatically. In one of the many operations by the military and related civilian defence squads, Antonio was separated from his parents. Families had been displaced from their villages and had to keep moving around in the mountains in Quiché department.

He remembers that soldiers had come to Chajul, surrounded the population and attacked them. Some people realized the danger and ran away. His mother sent him off to hide in the hills away from the settlement where he went on his own and spent the night. His mother, his two brothers and eleven other people were killed by the soldiers

The soldiers found him the following day and took him back to the settlement where there were soldiers only. They told him that they would kill him, but he did not understand what this meant. However, a "*patrullero*", a member of the *Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil* (PAC), pleaded with the officer in charge and was allowed to keep Antonio. He took the child to his home where he stayed for about a year and then went to live with a "grandfather", the father of the man who had saved him, with whom he stayed until recently.

Antonio grew up wondering about his family; he did not know whether his father and brothers were alive or dead. "I was so sad and distressed. I didn't have anyone to turn to," he reflects. He then heard about "*¿Dónde están los niños?*" (Where are the children?), an organization involved in the search for children who disappeared during the armed conflict. He visited their office and left his details.

A lucky coincidence happened in 2002; during an event celebrating the reunion of disappeared children and their families, someone mentioned Antonio's case and further information and leads emerged. An investigation followed and Pedro Brito, Antonio's father, was located in the Esfuerzo 2000 community, in Ixcán, Quiché.

Antonio and his father were finally reunited on 15 January 2004. "I felt very happy, because I've been so lonely," he said. Since the reunion, he has kept in contact with his "adoptive" father. His father expressed his gratitude to the man who had saved his son and looked after him.

You could think that it is better to leave the past alone; that it is not good to keep remembering the past instead of moving on. The governments think so. But you would be wrong and they are wrong. The strongest longing of these "children", just a sample of a much

larger group, was always to find their families. They did, but there are still hundreds who have yet to fulfil that dream.

Further information :

Copies of "*Historias para tener presente*" and other relevant publications are available from Asociación Pro-Búsqueda - <http://www.probusqueda.org.sv> .