

Guatemala Indian group

forced to flee homeland

OHSWEKEN — In my last column I mentioned that at Ohsweken there was a New Year's gathering of Indians from South America, Central America and North America. The group from Central America were from the Land of Corn. The white invaders have given it the name Guatemala. It was in this area or across the border in Mexico that Indian farmers developed the grain that we North Americans call corn. In other parts of the world it is called maize.

Ten thousand years ago the ears of corn were only about two inches long. Fossilized corn from that long ago has been found in caves in Mexico. It took thousands of years of development by Indian farmers to produce the large ears and kernels of modern corn. They also developed many varieties, such as popcorn long before the Europeans arrived a few hundred years ago. Modern science has been able to make only a few minor improvements such as hybrid corn but this kind cannot reproduce itself. It is useless as seed.

Indians developed many foods using corn as a base ingredient, such as tortillas and tacos. Tortillas from Central America and Mexico and corn bread from Six Nations look different but they taste almost the same. People in the U.S. and Canada mistakenly call tortillas and tacos Mexican food. They are really Indian food. They were developed and eaten by the Indians of that area long before there was a Mexico.

At most modern powwows you will see Indian tacos advertised. Indians living in the U.S. and Canada have developed this form of taco using wheat flour like their scones and bannock. Wheat was brought over by the white people and it makes good bread. However, tacos made that way would more properly be called "white man's tacos" not Indian tacos. Tacos made with corn flour are the real Indian dish.

The Indians from Guatemala who visited the Six Nations Reserve are Mayan Indians. They now live in Tor-

onto because they are refugees who fled from the fighting in Guatemala. The situation for native Indians there is very bad. There are 22 native Indian languages in this land of more than eight million people. Many of them do not speak or understand Spanish well, if at all. Ever since the Europeans arrived, they have exploited the Mayan-speaking Indians. Now they are the poorest of the poor dispersed into the mountains and the unproductive land. Meanwhile the good land is now occupied by rich, uncaring descendants of Europeans, who have huge estates. On these they grow coffee, sugar cane, cotton and

rubber and they actually pay starvation wages.

Although the minimum wage is 10 quetzales a day, or \$2.94 U.S., the coffee estates this year paid only 4.5 quetzales, or \$1.32 U.S. Workers who protest are fired — or worse. Leaders are routinely found dead or are arrested by the army and taken away, never to be seen again. The rich land owners and the army support each other. The U.S. also supports them with helicopter gunships, rockets, rifles and bullets. Lots and lots of bullets.

The Indians and Ladinos (half-bloods), what we in Canada call Metis, make up the vast majority of Campesinos (peasants). These Campesinos want enough wages to feed their families. What father wouldn't? In Guatemala 81 per cent of the children under the age of five suffer from malnutrition. Would we put up with it? Especially when people on nearby estates are living in luxury?

In Guatemala 80 per cent of the arable land is said to belong to two per

cent of the population. But people who speak about land reform are called communists and are routinely killed, often with U.S. bullets. Native Indian villages are often blown up with U.S. bombs and rockets. One Indian woodcutter, who couldn't even speak Spanish, was caught away from his village by government soldiers who beat and shot him. Then they ate his tortillas. The poor man didn't even know what a communist was. What they have in Guatemala may not be communism but it is certainly not democracy either.

If they ever achieve democracy or even peace, there are over a million displaced Campesinos, many of them native Indians, who would like to return to their land, which they call the Land of Corn.

Our Town is an Expositor feature which provides a forum for news and views from some of the smaller centres in the region. George Beaver is a Six Nations reserve resident and was a teacher and principal on the Six Nations and New Credit reserves for 33 years.

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