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Interview: Rigoberta Menchu Speaks On Racism, Indigenous Resistance, & Achieving Peace In Guatemala

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[1992 Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu was born Jan. 9, 1959 in the village of Chimel, El Quiche department. Her younger brother and mother were both killed by government security forces. Her father, indigenous activist Vicente Menchu, was killed Jan. 31, 1980 after he and other members of the Campesino Unity Committee (Comite de Unidad Campesina, CUC) had staged a peaceful occupation of the Spanish Embassy in Guatemala City. Along with Vicente Menchu, 37 others including CUC members and embassy staff were killed when police stormed the premises. Most were burned alive in a blaze which engulfed the building. Later that year, after receiving numerous death threats, Rigoberta Menchu went into exile in Mexico. Since that time, she has travelled around the world, denouncing human rights abuses and lack of respect for indigenous rights in a variety of international forums. The following interview was conducted in late September, in Mexico City, by journalist Anders Riis-Hansen. The interview was released by the Commission for the Defense of Human Rights in Central America (Comision para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos en Centroamerica, CODEHUCA), a regional umbrella group of human rights organizations.] Anders Riis-Hansen: What factors led to your interest in defending human rights and the rights of indigenous peoples? Rigoberta Menchu: I was born to a family where my father struggled for over 22 years in order to secure the piece of earth on which we were born. As the local comadrona, my mother attended 90% of all pregnant women, and she took care of the ill, of the malnourished children. Based on her role as the local doctor and comadrona, she had profound convictions regarding our Mayan gods...I also have a brother who, along with his wife and their three children, are buried in a clandestine grave. Someday, I would like to give my brother and his family a decent burial, in the place where our father always dreamed that we would be buried. I've known so many people who are no longer alive. One lives in their memory. ARH: On Oct. 12, many countries will sponsor celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the discovery of America. What does the indigenous population think of this? RM: We have seen many occupations of our lands, colonizers have lined up one behind the other, in the past and still today. In my opinion, to celebrate the 12th of October is an absolute expression of triumphalism, of occupation, of arrogance. I think that anyone who has mature and responsible political views should not celebrate this date. I also think that history will be the ultimate judge of those who do celebrate. At the same time, the quincentenary has opened many opportunities for us in international forums. In this regard, I am very pleased that the United Nations has declared 1993 the International Year for Indigenous Populations. It is the first time such a thing has occurred in 500 years!...I also feel that this situation has generated a new awareness about the cultural diversity of the Americas. We were the first ones to speak of cultural diversity, of the need to respect the Mayan peoples, and of the need to respect the environment. ARH: In your opinion, what should indigenous peoples do in commemoration of October 12th? RM: Why only indigenous peoples? This is a date which has to do with the cultural plurality of the Americas. It is an issue for indigenous, for blacks, for mestizos, and for all races on the continent. Our struggle should not be one of race against race. If that were the case, then we

too will have become racists. These are backward thoughts which correspond to an earlier part of human history. In any case, clearly October 12 is a special date, but I don't think it's going to change the situation much. The struggle of indigenous peoples didn't begin in 1992 and it is not going to end in 1992 either. This is but an opportunity to take advantage of international attention. ARH: It was over 100 years ago that the last country on the American continent abolished slavery. How are racism and repression expressed today? RM: Well, in the case of my country, Guatemala, 65% of the national population are indigenous and we have a Constitution which speaks of the need to protect the Indians. Who was it that gave permission for a minority to protect the immense majority of the population! We are not speaking simply of questions regarding political, cultural and economic marginalization. This is a question of a frontal attack against the basic dignity of the majority of the country's population. Human beings should be defended and respected, not protected as if they were birds or a river. Racism exists in our countries to the extent that indigenous are not supposed to get involved in politics or aspire to become head of state. Racism exists when we see that 99% of all indigenous women have never attended school. The indigenous population is basically condemned to living a life of extermination, given that they receive a salary of extermination, that they cannot speak or write the language, that political decisions are simply imposed on them. Is this slavery? I'm not sure what it should be called. Clearly it doesn't look like the slavery of old, because we live in modern times. ARH: Have you personally felt racism? RM: I certainly have. For example, during the recent San Jose summit meeting held in Portugal, where all the Central American presidents were in attendance, the Guatemalan delegation threatened to walk out on the proceedings if I was allowed to enter the room where they were meeting in order to deliver a document on the situation in Guatemala. For them, a self-educated indigenous person, born in the mountains, who ate roots and leaves and who didn't attend school, who doesn't have a professional degree, it was inconceivable for them to allow the presence of such a person there. It would have been the biggest embarrassment they could have imagined. Racists cannot even tolerate the mere presence of a person who is not of their own race and who doesn't share their convictions. ARH: A certain degree of demilitarization has been achieved in Nicaragua and El Salvador, yet in Guatemala the war continues. What are the reasons for this? RM: On the one hand, because in each country throughout the Americas, the problems which have given rise to such conflicts have developed very differently over the course of the last 500 years. On the other hand, because the indigenous population in Guatemala has never been taken into account, despite the fact that 80% of the victims of repression and of impunity are the indigenous peoples. In addition, we are talking about a country where 23 different languages are spoken, in addition to Spanish. ARH: And how do you explain the fact that the war in Guatemala has never received the same amount of international attention as in the cases of El Salvador or Nicaragua? RM: One of the reasons is the very same issue of racism. As indigenous, we don't have our own means of mass communication. Our people have never been allowed to speak through the mass media or through the political system. The absolute marginalization of the indigenous peoples, plus a very sophisticated process of militarization, are the ingredients which have combined to produce this silent war. ARH: What do you see as the most important obstacles for achieving peace in Guatemala? RM: The problem in Guatemala is that there has been no solution for the issue of respect for human rights, nor for the question of militarization, nor for the unjust distribution of wealth. We also have the questions of intolerance of the indigenous population, discrimination and marginalization. If we don't search for concrete measures to address the factors which gave rise to the conflict in the first place, I don't believe the war will be brought to an end. (...) ARH: In your view, what should the international community do in order to support achieving peace in Guatemala? RM: Inaction on the part of the international

community with respect to Guatemala is unjustifiable. The international community should play an active role, with concrete measures such as sanctions. Sanctions have been imposed on South Africa and Iraq, Yugoslavia, Cuba and Haiti. Why not on Guatemala? Why should killing be legalized in one place and not in another? This [double standard] is being recorded in the collective memory of our people. ARH: Many Guatemalans speak of a culture of violence and a culture of death in your country. Do you agree with this type of affirmation? RM: The culture of death is something which has come about as a product of powerful economic and political sectors, of the arrogance of power, and of pervasive corruption. I think that ultimately, blame for this situation rests with the First World, which for so many years has sacked our sources of wealth. I'm speaking about the superpowers which dominate the life of our planet. Specifically, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The same ones who have generated and tolerated the killing of our peoples, the ones who are responsible for the sacking of the Third World. Silence is also part of repression. If we speak of our peoples, the most sacred thing for us have always been tranquility and life. Violence and repression are completely incompatible with the pacific face of the Guatemalan people. It's a permanent clash to see the continued existence of these two faces of Guatemala. ARH: The last time you visited Guatemala, in July 1992, you were the victim of three separate assassination attempts. Do you hold President Jorge Serrano responsible for your security? RM: No, I hold the war itself responsible, the army and the system of impunity. Since many years ago, the governing force in Guatemala is the system of impunity, based on the lack of will from the head of state on down to prosecute those responsible. I condemn impunity and I condemn the system which is governing Serrano. Impunity should be condemned in any part of the world, wherever it occurs. ARH: In visiting Guatemala, do you fear for your life? RM: Not only in Guatemala, but wherever I go. Our lives do not belong to us, at any moment they can be taken away from us. We Mayans, our grandparents always told us, each human being occupies but a small portion of time. Time itself is much, much larger, and for this reason they impressed upon us the need to take good care of this land for the short period we are on it. That is because we will pass it on to our children, and the children of our grandchildren. We understand that life is short, that it could end soon, and that if one gets lost along the way, others will come along to take their place. ARH: Do you feel that a Nobel Peace Prize could help achieve peace in Guatemala? RM: I think it already has helped a great deal! We have broken the silence regarding Guatemala. We have been able to demand an end to the practice of giving blank checks to governments which violate human rights. I'd also like to make one thing very clear. We cannot modify our discourse nor can we soften the name of the reality which we are forced to live. That would be equivalent to committing treason against our dignity. It will never happen, irrespective of what may happen with the Nobel. The gulf which separates rich and poor in Guatemala must be eliminated. Until then, we will continue to be the example of conflict in America.

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