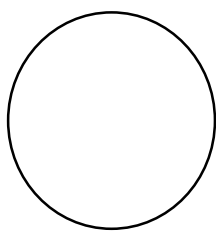


TRIAL Dutch theologist, Mario Coolen, and Marlies Stappers from the human rights organisation, Impunity Watch, are standing up for the plight of Guatemalan workers who disappeared without a trace some forty years ago, and the people they left behind. A lack of funding might mean an untimely end to the good work they carry out.

Stijn Fens

The victims of the sugar repression in Guatemala have waited forty years for justice to be done



On May 12th, 1980- exactly forty years ago, to the day – Flemish priest, Walter Voordeckers, left the parish hall in Santa Lucía on the south coast of Guatemala, to collect his mail from the post

office. Outside, four armed men were waiting to abduct him. Theologian, Mario Coolen, who used to work closely with Voordeckers, remembers that this wise Flemish man always used to tell his colleagues what they should do in these kinds of situations: run away, waving your arms frantically about. That is exactly what he did. But he did not have a chance. Voordeckers was killed in cold blood, with seven bullets fired into him.

The murder of Walter Voordeckers took place shortly after sugar cane cutters from the region around Santa Lucía had staged a mass strike that resulted in better wages. Through its work to raise awareness and strengthen grassroots communities, the Santa Lucía pastoral team, which Voordeckers and Coolen were members of, had laid the foundations of the CUC farmers' organisation that organised the strike. By doing this, Voordeckers had implicated himself in the eyes of the large landowners. It later turned out that they were behind his murder.

Six weeks earlier, Archbishop Romero had been murdered in El Salvador. He also stood up for the poor; he also opposed the violence of the local government and armed militia. "Walter always listened to Romero's sermons and in a way he was his echo in Guatemala", says Coolen.



A meeting for the victims' relatives. Photo: Piet den Blanken

"Three men were strung up with their heads hanging down over some gasoline jerry cans."



Alenjandra Ramirez holding the pictures of her disappeared husband Isodoro Loch and her sister-in-law Maria Victoria Loch.

It did not stop with Voordeckers' murder. In the following period, more than a hundred people from Santa Lucía were captured and disappeared forever. They had all been involved in the strike, were members of grassroots church communities, and the CUC. At that time, Coolen himself was abroad, more or less by coincidence, and hadn't returned to Guatemala. He is still affected by what happened to his friends from Santa Lucía. "Take don Máximo, for instance. He was our sacristan. His son, Román, was captured. He was also involved in the strike. By some miracle, Máximo managed to get into the garrison that his son had been taken to. Three men were strung up with their heads hanging down over some gasoline jerry cans. The soldiers asked him: 'Is your son one of them, hanging there?' And indeed, that was the case, but before don Máximo could answer, his son signalled to him that he should say no. 'No, I don't know them', he said. He has never seen his son since."

After this, it all went quiet on the subject of the missing residents of Santa Lucía. Surviving family and friends were devastated, but they dared not open their mouths for fear of bringing problems on themselves. Around the year 2000, Mario Coolen, with two friends from Guatemala, started to put the life stories of the missing people in writing, even though some of the families still did not want to cooperate. Coolen: "At least they knew where Walter was buried, but all of the other families did not have a place that they could go to in order to grieve. They had no idea what had happened to their loved ones. In the end, three memorial books were produced with hundreds of life stories. They became an epitaph for the surviving relatives, a place they could go to."

"At least they knew where Walter was buried, but all of the other families did not have a place that they could go to in order to grieve."

ALEJANDRA RAMIREZ

"Shortly after my husband, Isidro, was abducted, I was visited by a couple of military policemen. They asked me if my husband kept weapons. 'Yes, of course', I answered, 'my husband had a weapon.' 'I'd like to see it', one of the policemen said. I went inside and came back with the Bible. The policeman burst out laughing. 'Madame', he said, 'that isn't a weapon, it's the Bible.' 'That's right', I said, 'this is the Bible that my husband always carried with him. The Bible is a weapon that goes straight through the heart of people who do bad deeds and who begrudge others the light of day. My husband lived by what the Bible teaches.' The military policemen didn't say another word and slunk away."



MERCEDES MARROQUIN

"We haven't heard a thing about my husband, Jesús, since the moment he was captured. I sometimes feel his arm around my shoulder, something he always did when he got home from work. For a long time, my children would wait for their father every evening, until they realised that he was really never coming home. Sometimes, I think that my husband is out there somewhere and one day he will just turn up. If he was dead, then at least we could have buried him and we'd know where he was laid to rest. But now, that's not the case. I think that is why I still continue to fight against the thought that my husband is dead. That's just how our spirit works."

International trial

The stories from Santa Lucía also gained the attention of Pope Francis and international lawyers. Their message was: "There is definitely an international trial in this."

Based on the evidence that was collected in these books and supported by the international attention they were getting, the surviving relatives decided to ask human rights organisation Impunity Watch – that was also involved in putting the memorial books together – to support them with an international trial. Marlies Stappers, the director of Impunity Watch, has now been fighting for justice for years, together with the people of Santa Lucía.

"In 2018, together with three of the victims from Santa Lucía, we presented the indictment to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights", she tells us. "As is customary, the Guatemalan government was also represented, because they have the right to react to the indictment. The government's representative argued that the events happened so long ago that the reasonable term for starting a trial expired a long time ago, and was thus nonsensical, and moreover, it would traumatise the victims yet again."

The commission's reaction was very clear: "The victims' testimonies bear such gravity that they cannot be left without an answer from the State. Therefore, we, in our role as Commission, want to inform the victims and the Guatemalan government that we will continue with our work on this case."

International trials are complex processes that can take years. The process for Santa Lucía has just begun and is expected to take some time. There are costs involved: an estimated 100,000 Euros per year. The work carried out by Mario Coolen and Marlies Stappers has received financial backing from the Netherlands for years, including from Solidaridad, the Franciscan Sisters and the Mennonite Community of Haarlem. The Dutch government has also contributed. But congregations of nuns are losing members and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs has shifted its attention to other parts of the world. Now, the quest for justice for the victims of Santa Lucía is under the threat of coming to an untimely end.

It is keeping Stappers awake at night. "How are we going to make sure that we can continue to support the surviving families at this hopeful and crucial moment, right when our support is most needed? The people of Santa Lucía are counting on our solidarity. This year, here in the Netherlands, we are remembering that the Second World War ended 75 years ago. The message to us all is that we should never forget the victims. That is also the case for the victims of Santa Lucía. And not only that: a lot of the sugar that is produced in Guatemala comes to Europe, to the Netherlands too. The fact that, even today, the conditions under which sugar is harvested remain very much unchanged, shows just how effective that repression was, and just how important it is that justice is done."

Coolen also sleeps badly because of the thought that he won't be able to complete this work for the people from Santa Lucía. "I feel like I am also an accomplice and want to remain loyal to my friends who have disappeared. I have lived with this story for forty years and I will keep on telling it for as long as I live. To me, it's also partly a question of belief. You could say that in Santa Lucía we found ourselves in Golgotha, although a grave is missing. The resurrection will only happen once the graves of the victims have been found. Then you can't get away with pious sayings, like: 'it's all right, because Jesus has already risen for us.' Until we know exactly what happened, for the victims of Santa Lucía, and also for myself, the story has not yet ended."