

SURINAM

Participation in a conference in Paramaribo, Surinam, to discuss the possibility of establishing a Truth Commission

In August 1998 EAAF member Luis Fondebrider conducted a two-day mission to Surinam and participated in a conference that explored the possibility of establishing a Surinamese truth and reconciliation commission. The mission was funded by the Inter-American Institute for Human Rights (IIDH) and EAAF.

Background

Between 1980 and 1988 Surinam was ruled by a military dictatorship headed by Desi Bouterse, who took power through a coup d'etat. Serious violations of human rights allegedly occurred during Bouterse's rule, including executions of 15 opposition leaders in 1982 and a massacre of civilians at the village of Moiwana in 1986, as well as routine harassment of many sectors of the population. In 1990 Bouterse staged another coup and ruled the country again until the following year.

In 1991 democratic government was re-established in Surinam. Human rights groups and other organizations began calling for investigations into past human rights abuses. (One of these organizations located a grave where, according to witnesses, victims of the 1986 Moiwana massacre had been buried.) In December 1995 the National Assembly of Surinam passed a resolution calling for the government to conduct an investigation into executions that had occurred in 1982, and in January 1996 then-President Ronald Venetiaan announced that his government would do so. Following this announcement, some of the relatives of the alleged massacre victims and human rights workers received anonymous death threats, and the house of one of the

relatives was fire-bombed. Venetiaan took no subsequent action to begin the investigation during the spring of 1996, and his government was defeated in Parliamentary elections in May 1996.

The new government, headed by President Jules Wijdenbosch, resisted demands to investigate alleged human rights violations for a year and a half. Finally, in December 1997 his government established a committee to "establish the framework for a commission to investigate past human rights abuses." Human rights advocates, however, feared that the committee would not be objective, because the chairman was reputedly one of former dictator Bouterse's legal advisors. The Wijdenbosch government has also appointed Bouterse and Bouterse supporters to prominent positions within the government, raising fears that the human rights situation in the country may deteriorate.

The Organization for Justice and Peace (*Gerechtiged en Vrede*), an independent non-governmental organization, has been working to create an independent truth commission that would include national and international experts.

EAAF's Mission

On August 21st and 22nd, 1998, EAAF member Luis Fondebrider traveled to Paramaribo, Surinam, to participate in an international conference on Truth and Reconciliation organized by the Organization for Justice and Peace and the Inter-American Institution for Human Rights (IIDH), Costa Rica.

The event was organized to discuss the possibility of establishing a Truth Commission to

investigate human rights violations that occurred in Surinam during the 1980s. The organizers of the conference invited foreign participants to describe similar efforts in other countries, and to discuss issues concerning truth, justice, reparations, and reconciliation with members of local non-governmental organizations.

Juan Mendes, Executive Director of the Inter-American Institute for Human Rights, moderated the discussion. The other foreign participants at the conference included Alfredo Forti, who spoke about the Honduran experience; Peter Baehr, who spoke about South Africa; Margaret Popkin, who spoke about El Salvador; Claudette Werleigh, who spoke about Haiti; and Fonderbrider, who described the uses of forensic anthropology for human rights investigations.

A number of local non-governmental organizations also made presentations.

The conference concluded with a forum in which the participants developed a number of proposals for establishing a Truth Commission.