

The Legacies of War

Guahu si Victoria-Lola Montecalvo Leon Guerrero, and I am a proud daughter of Guahan.

I appeal to you today because my homeland is in grave danger. Young Chamorus, doctors, teachers and future leaders are leaving the island as US Marines, fighter aircraft bombers, unmanned aerial vehicles, fast-attack nuclear submarines and foreign construction workers take their place. Every year, hundreds of Native Chamorus decide to move off our island because they can no longer afford to live on Guahan. Already more Chamorus live in the US mainland than on the island. As a representative of the Guahan Indigenous Collective, I urge you to help bring an end to this great exodus. I ask you to include in your draft resolution that the US military build-up on Guahan is a direct impediment to the decolonization of Guahan and the right of Indigenous Chamorus to decide our future and survive in our homeland.

The Guahan Indigenous Collective believes that our island's people and natural resources are our most precious assets. We believe that every effort must be made to educate our community about and support community involvement in decision-making that will impact our survival. We recently circulated a Peace Petition that calls for an end to military build-up on Guahan. Three Hundred Ninety-Four Chamorus, non-profit organizations, US national NGOs and others concerned about Guahan's future signed the Petition. They acknowledged that the United States, as Guahan's administering power, has both the moral and legal responsibility to protect the human rights and self-determination of the Chamoru people.

As a daughter of Guahan, I also represent my familia. I was named after my grandmother's baby sister, Victoria San Nicolas Ibanez. She died during World War II on Guahan. She was only four, but she had a spirit that lives on through me as was intended by my great-grandmother, my Nanan Biha. She asked my mother to name her first daughter Victoria to keep her memory and her desire to share the effects of that war, that loss present and alive.

Many Chamorus died during World War II after the United States left our island defenseless to the Japanese. In just two days Guahan was surrendered to Japan. The US Naval Government did not warn the Chamorus that war would be at Guahan's shores. Instead, the Chamoru people were told that the US was the strongest government in the world and that Guahan would always be protected.

But Tan Alfonsina wasn't protected as she hid beneath the body of her brother in a dark, wet cave on July 19, 1944. Alfonsina Sablan was just 13 when she felt the sharp pain of a Japanese soldier's bayonet thrust into her bony back. She lay still, this 13-year-old, inhaled the pain and pretended to be dead while others around her, her cousins, friends, family, were brutally raped and murdered. Her bother and her shield from death, 19-year-old Nicolas was dead, murdered by the spray of bullets and hand grenades thrown into the cave by Japanese soldiers. Now, more than 60 years later, the sufferings of Tan Alfonsina, my Great Auntie Victoria and so many of our Chamoru elders have yet to be fully recognized by the United States. All of Guahan's non-voting representatives to US Congress have pushed for war reparations to the people of Guahan for the atrocities endured during World War II. The United States absolved Japan from having to pay such reparations, and has yet, despite promises on the horizon, to repay Chamorus, or really, fully recognize Guahan's role in this history that changed the world.

The legacy of World War II created the United Nations and this forum I speak before today, but also created the impediments to the self-determination and decolonization that we are all here to discuss and ultimately achieve. Since World War II, the US military presence on Guahan has been devastating to the survival of our language and culture as a Chamoru people, our right to create our own form of government, our right to own the land that was passed down to us by our ancestors, our civil right to vote for all our leaders including the US president that is the Commander in Chief of the military that occupies 30 percent of our island, and our basic human right to survival.

The legacy of World War II has led to the toxic pollution of our land and surrounding waters from nuclear and other carcinogenic waste and has increased the amounts of cancers and deaths among Chamoru people. And the legacy of World War II has meant that our Chamoru sons and daughters are forced to leave Guahan, their homeland, because the United States has limited our economic resources to tourism and military spending.

There is a shortage of competitive jobs for young Chamoru people, who choose to enlist in the US military because they are told it will give them a brighter future. Yet, in every war the US has fought since World War II – Vietnam, the Gulf War and the current “War on Terror” more Chamorus have died per capita than any other soldiers. And what do Chamoru families get when they lose a son or daughter to war? What do we get when we lose a life we poured 21 years and our hopes for the future into? We get a small sum of money, a US flag and a free burial spot to visit at the veteran’s cemetery. What about that life? How do we get that back?

How do we get back the lives we’ve lost, the Chamorus who have been forced off their homeland, and the land we need to build on so that they can return? We do not get these resources back with an increased US military presence on our island. But without the right to self-determination, we have no power, no legal recourse in which to stop this military build-up that will further displace the Chamoru people.

Earlier this year, the US Department of Defense unveiled its plan to move 8,000 Marines and their 9,000 dependents from Okinawa and Japan to Guahan, and to increase the existing population of Navy and Air Force personnel on the island. By 2014, there will be an estimated population increase of at least 35,000 people, which will greatly impact the island’s current population of 168,000 and change our cultural, political, social and ecological environment.

I stand before you today to stress how urgent this situation is. The decision to increase the US military presence on Guahan is a set back to the goals of your committee and to the decolonization of our island. Please include in the draft resolution that military activities and arrangements by Guahan’s colonial power, the United States, impedes the implementation of the declaration on granting independence to Guahan and the Chamoru people.

- *Sinangan Si Victoria Leon Guerrero Ginnen*
The Guahan Indigenous Collective