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Nobel winner listens to testimony of workers rounded up in Iowa raid

By Sister Carol Hoverman Catholic News Service

POSTVILLE, Iowa (CNS) -- She came from Guatemala to Postville for one purpose.

"I have come to listen specifically to the testimonies of the people who have suffered abuses here from the raid," Rigoberta Menchu said. "I come not only to listen to your suffering, but also to identify with your suffering. Your pain is my pain."

So began the message of the 1992 recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize for her work in human rights, first in Guatemala and now on the international stage.

About 300 people gathered in St. Bridget Church Nov. 8 to hear her message, to pray together and to hear the testimony of people who had been detained following the morning raid last May at Agriprocessors kosher meatpacking plant by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The majority of the immigrants were from Guatemala.

In the raid 389 employees were arrested and detained. Most of those arrested were charged with felonies relating to the use of false IDs. They accepted plea agreements calling for five-month sentences before they were to be deported.

Fifty people, mostly women, were allowed to avoid detention but immigration authorities continue to monitor them by making them wear ankle bracelets with tracking devices.

Speaking sometimes in English but mostly in Spanish aided by a translator, Menchu said what the workers have gone through is the type of suffering that is happening in more places in the world but people do not know about it. However, with the publicity following the raid, the public is finally aware of it, not only in the United States, but all over the world, she stated.

"Your suffering can become the voice of freedom, of liberty, so people can know what pain others are enduring," she continued. "Your suffering becomes a mission, an example of solidarity ... an example of a town that has suffered."

She said she hoped the Postville events would be a catalyst for new immigration laws that respect human rights in the United States. As a follow-up to visiting Postville, Menchu said she will ask for an appointment with President-elect Barack Obama after he has taken office in January.

"So many things have happened with the raid that are questionable. The injustice is unbelievable!" she said.

Following her remarks, Menchu listened attentively and took copious notes as people came to the microphone to describe their experience of the raid.

The first woman, Ana, who came to the U.S. from a poor farming town in Mexico, was among the women taken to Waterloo. Because she has young children, she was returned to Postville to care for them. But she is not allowed to work and wears an ankle bracelet.

She expressed gratitude to the church and community for their financial support.

"We just want the chance to work, and make life better for our children," she said through an interpreter. "Going back to Mexico, it will be very hard to make a living."

Her children were born in the U.S. so they are American citizens and don't want to go to Mexico. They are traumatized and are receiving psychological help, but they feel like "birds with broken wings, unable to fly," she said.

She also noted that when the ankle bracelets recharge themselves, they get hot, and many wearers have burns and wounds on their legs from wearing them for more than five months.

Men and women wearing the devices then gathered around Menchu as she bent down to examine their legs.

Next, Irma from Guatemala expressed gratitude to Menchu for "coming all the way from Guatemala to support us."

She said when immigration officials arrested her and the others "we were treated like animals."

She, too, was returned to Postville to care for her children and wears the ankle tracking device. Her husband has been deported to Guatemala and she relies on charity to survive.

Pedro, now 13, said that on the day of the raid he was in school when he heard about it.

"Something popped in my head that said, 'My mom's in there, and she got caught,'" he continued as his voice shook. He and his two siblings spent the next week hiding in their basement at home.

His mother did not tell immigration officials about her children for fear they would be taken, he said, so she was taken to a jail in Georgia and was housed with criminals. She has since been deported to Mexico.

"I know that there is a God, and he helped me get through this," Pedro said.

On Nov. 10 the Iowa Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the state's bishops, released a resolution the bishops approved in October asking Catholics to reflect on whether the Postville raid was "consistent with American democracy and rendering of justice." The bishops also asked Catholics to support immigration reform.

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