

Human rights report documents massacres by military regime

US government responsible for genocide and terror in Guatemala

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27 February 1999

The United States government played a major role in supporting and assisting genocide and state terrorism in Guatemala, according to a UN-sponsored report, "Guatemala, Memory of Silence," which was issued Thursday. The nine volumes made public by the Historical Clarification Commission document the systematic torture and murder of 200,000 people, the vast majority of them Mayan Indians, during a 34-year civil war which ended in 1996.

The commission consisted of a German jurist, Christian Tomuschat, and two Guatemalans, Edgar Balsells, a lawyer, and Otilia Lux Coti, a Mayan teacher, acting under the terms of the cease-fire agreement supervised by the United Nations three years ago. Although the report was partially financed by the US Agency for International Development, and it was barred from naming any individuals, including US government officials, implicated in the genocide, its findings were a devastating indictment of both the Guatemalan and American state.

After taking testimony from 9,200 witnesses on all sides in the civil war, and investigating the circumstances surrounding the deaths of 42,000 people, the commission concluded that 93 percent of the deaths were caused by human rights violations on the part of the military and the Guatemalan government, while only 3 percent were caused by the actions of the leftist guerrillas of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union, who laid down their arms in 1996. In 4 percent of the cases it could not be determined who was responsible.

"The massacres that eliminated entire Mayan villages," the report said, "are neither perfidious allegations nor figments of the imagination, but an

authentic chapter in Guatemala's history."

"The majority of human rights violations occurred with the knowledge or by order of the highest authorities of the state," the commissioners concluded. "The responsibility for a large part of these violations, with respect to the chain of military command as well as the political and administrative responsibility, reaches the highest levels of the army and successive governments."

The massacres were politically motivated: "Believing that the ends justified everything, the military and state security forces blindly pursued the anti-Communist struggle, without respect for any legal principles or the most elemental ethical and religious values, and in this way completely lost any semblance of human morals."

The worst atrocities were committed in the early 1980s, when General Efraim Rios Montt was president, after seizing power in a military coup, and when Ronald Reagan was in the White House and Alexander Haig in the Department of State. The Guatemalan army perpetrated nearly 600 massacres in the course of a scorched-earth campaign against the Mayan Indian population in the upland region of the country, more than half of them in a single province, El Quiche.

Christian Tomuschat described the Guatemalan government's policy during the years 1981 to 1983 as "acts of genocide against groups of the Mayan people." Some 83 percent of the victims of massacres were Mayan Indians, and one Mayan tribe, the Ixil, lost between 70 percent and 90 percent of its villages.

Tomuschat declared that the US government provided support for the terror campaign in Guatemala for more than two decades. "Up until the mid-1980s, there was strong pressure from the US government and US

companies to maintain the country's archaic and unjust economic structure," he said.

The panel's report found that the US government was aware of the genocide at the time it was taking place, and that it encouraged the atrocities against the Indian population. Among the actions of government soldiers, military police and paramilitary units were the widespread raping of Indian women before they were massacred, and the systematic torture of those suspected of sympathy with the guerrilla movement.

The US Central Intelligence Agency lent support to "some illegal operations," while the Pentagon's School of the Americas, the notorious academy at Ft. Benning, Georgia which trained a generation of Latin American officers in counterinsurgency methods, "had a significant bearing on human rights violations during the armed confrontation."

The high point of the Guatemalan civil war coincided with the launching of the US-backed contra war against Nicaragua, as well as massive US military aid to the death-squad regime in El Salvador. During that period virtually the whole of Central America, from Guatemala to Panama, was caught up in the US-inspired anticommunist terror.

More than 2,000 people, many of them relatives of those murdered or "disappeared" during the civil war, cheered and shouted their approval during the reading of the report's summary at a public ceremony in Guatemala City. Some chanted, "Efraim Rios Montt, just like Pinochet," and demanded that those responsible for the genocide be named and prosecuted. Government officials and army officers sat through the proceeding in silence and President Alvaro Arzu refused to receive a copy of the report from the commissioners.

Arzu recently blamed the massacres on excessive zeal by lower-ranking military officers. The report specifically rejects this contention. Tomuschat declared, "The excuses that lower-ranking soldiers acted with wide autonomy, explaining that excesses and errors were committed that were not ordered by superiors, are baseless arguments based on our investigation."

The report's sweeping indictment of the Guatemalan military and government is particularly courageous given the fate of a Roman Catholic bishop who conducted a similar investigation last year. Several

days later the bishop, Juan Jose Gerardi, was beaten to death with a concrete block. His killers have not been identified or punished.

The US Ambassador to Guatemala, Donald Planty, sought to obscure the clear conclusion of the report about American complicity in genocide and state terror. "I believe that the report's focus is appropriate that these were abuses committed by Guatemalans against other Guatemalans," he said, "the result of an internal conflict."

"Guatemala, Memory of Silence" demonstrates the long-term historical role of American imperialism in this oppressed Central American country. It also constitutes a crushing refutation of the claims of the Clinton administration that the US government is the leader of a global war on "international terrorism." On the contrary, Washington is today, just as in the 1980s, the leading practitioner of state terrorism, whether in the form of bombing defenseless civilians in Iraq, kidnapping political opponents like Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan, or arming and training ruthless dictatorships from the Congo to Indonesia.



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