

Legacy of oppression

Clinton's crocodile tears for Central America

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President Clinton made his four-day tour of Central America for the ostensible purpose of expressing sympathy for the thousands of victims who lost their lives to Hurricane Mitch, which ravaged the region last October, and solidarity with the hundreds of thousands more who have been left in utter destitution by the natural disaster.

The president's claims of solidarity, however, must be measured in concrete terms, ultimately in the dollars and cents of economic interests. The American president, famous for his moist-eyed declarations about "feeling the pain" of the poor and oppressed, came to Central America empty-handed as far as bringing any significant relief for the suffering populations of Central America. The administration is continuing international financial policies as well as domestic immigration ones that will only deepen the desperate poverty in the region.

In a more fundamental sense, the pretense that a US president is moved to visit El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Honduras because of a hurricane's destruction, no matter how devastating, is nothing short of obscene.

Any critical analysis of this "good-will" mission, however, would have to place the declared sentiments of the American president within a broader historical context. The suffering inflicted on the people of the Central American isthmus by winds and rains that struck the region last fall was indeed immense. At least 9,000 lives were lost to the storm and its economic impact is estimated at more than \$8 billion.

Yet on the scales of history, this colossal natural disaster will prove to be less devastating than the prolonged intervention of US imperialism that turned the region into an economic dependency of North American capital and a bloody killing field in counterrevolutionary warfare that went on for decades.

Clinton is, after all, the first US president to visit the region since 1968, when President Lyndon B. Johnson made a brief stopover in the Managua airport for a conversation with dictator Anastasio Somoza. Since then, more than 200,000 lost their lives to US-backed military forces in Guatemala, and hundreds of thousands more died at the hands of the army of El Salvador and the death squads of that country and as a result of the CIA-initiated contra war against Nicaragua.

A subtext of the Clinton tour has been the pretense that Central America is a subcontinent that has undergone a democratic rebirth and that Washington's role in the region has been transformed from military intervention to that of humanitarian relief and economic assistance.

The centerpiece of the Clinton trip has been a \$1 billion aid package. But this offer proved to be less than solid. The Republican-led Congress has refused to approve the measure, demanding that the Clinton administration carry out domestic spending to pay for the aid.

Included as part of the "aid" package is more than \$133 million for the Pentagon, replacing military funds that were already spent on hurricane relief. More than \$300 million of the money provided as US assistance already has gone to pay for deploying and maintaining 5,000 US troops sent to the region in the biggest deployment since the end of the US-backed aggression against Nicaragua at the beginning of the decade.

Another \$80 million in the proposed aid package is earmarked for the Immigration and Naturalization Service, allowing it to continue imprisoning undocumented Central American refugees, including so-called "criminal aliens," who have temporarily been spared from deportation because of the disaster in the region.

At least for much of the region, however, that element of US humanitarianism is about to come to an end. In the course of the tour, Clinton made it clear that his government has no intention of extending a moratorium on the deportations of Guatemalans and Salvadorans from the US.

In both countries, the forced repatriation of these immigrants will far outweigh any US aid in terms of the social and economic impact upon the country. Officials there have predicted that the return of hundreds of thousands of jobless migrants will unleash upheavals that will do far more damage than the hurricane. In El Salvador, remittances from its citizens who have found work in the US are the country's single greatest source of foreign income.

The scope of the proposed US aid becomes clearer when one considers that at the height of the war in El Salvador, Washington was providing the dictatorship in that country with \$1 billion a year in direct military aid and at least as much in economic assistance that supported the civil war waged against the Salvadoran people. Similar subsidies for mass killing were provided to the military regime in Guatemala and to the CIA-backed contra forces based in Honduras. The Honduran regime was itself propped up with massive aid in return for providing its territory as a base for US operations.

US officials have stressed throughout the tour that Clinton is not making amends for US intervention in the region, but rather telling the governments of the isthmus that they must "move on" from the previous period of genocidal political violence. The closest that

Clinton came to an apology for the atrocities committed by the CIA and the US military was to acknowledge that Washington had committed a "mistake" in backing the "military forces and intelligence units involved in the violence."

The economic and social conditions that gave rise to the revolutionary strivings of the Central American people and the brutal repression on the part of the US and the native oligarchies remain fundamentally unchanged.

The US, meanwhile, has itself "moved on" from the period of covert and open military intervention in the region by dramatically slashing all forms of aid to these impoverished countries. In El Salvador, for example, economic assistance went from \$292 million in 1992 to just \$34 million over the last year.

Moreover, the political setup, based upon a series of negotiated settlements between the military and the former guerrilla movements, has largely left in power those forces responsible for the mass murder and torture that took place from the 1960s on.

This was made clear on the eve of Clinton's arrival, as the ARENA party in El Salvador was elected to another term. Its candidate, Francisco Flores, projected a "kinder and gentler" face for the party, which was identified in the period of civil war with the most right-wing sections of the military and the country's infamous death squads. Nonetheless, after his victory was announced he publicly called upon his followers to "honor the memory" of Roberto D'Aubuisson, the party's founder, who was known during that period as "Major Blowtorch" for his well-known involvement in torture and political murder.

Perhaps the most revealing thing about the Salvadoran election was the mass abstention by the voters. Barely one-third of those eligible to cast ballots went to the polls. The turnout expresses a profound disaffection by the masses of workers and peasants not only from their traditional ruling class enemies organized in ARENA, but also the former guerrillas of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, who have cast aside former "revolutionary" and "socialist" slogans to embrace free market economics and close ties with Washington.

In Nicaragua, Clinton accompanied that country's right-wing president, Arnoldo Aleman, to the site of a town that was utterly destroyed by the hurricane. While the US president spent barely five hours in the country, an army of US secret service agents joined with the national military and police in imposing what amounted to a state of siege in the capital of Managua, preventing a threat of protests by the unions. Aleman has been severely criticized by both his political opponents and aid organizations for engaging in wholesale corruption in the handling of relief supplies and refusing to provide any aid to towns and villages controlled by the opposition.

Clinton also visited Guatemala in the immediate aftermath of the release of a United Nations-sponsored report exposing the genocidal state terrorism in that country and directly indicting Washington for its role in supporting, financing and advising the Guatemalan military.

Among the documents released by the US government (although the investigators specified that the US military provided no useful information whatsoever) were formerly secret documents making it clear that successive administrations were kept well informed of

the murderous campaign waged by a series of Guatemalan dictatorships against their own people, and that they continued to provide military hardware and assistance for precisely that purpose.

These documents dealt not only with the Reagan administration's deliberate cover-up for the extermination of entire Mayan populations in order to continue providing military aid, but indicated that the Clinton administration has itself continued the same essential policy of silence on repression in Guatemala.

One recently declassified secret report from the Defense Department from November 1992 informed the Clinton administration that ex-guerrillas from the National Revolutionary Union of Guatemala (URNG) were being forcibly recruited into the Guatemalan army. "Those who refuse to join are executed and buried in unmarked graves," the report stated. Another report informed the administration that, as in the days of military dictatorship, the Guatemalan army "does not take prisoners of war." Those captured, it continued, were "interrogated and, in the majority of cases, killed and burned."

The recently released report on the political violence in Guatemala is the latest in a series of similar documents that been brought out by commissions from Argentina to South Africa, attempting to promote "reconciliation" by exposing some of the crimes of the former regime. As elsewhere, the commission that prepared the report was established as part of a political settlement that guaranteed impunity to those responsible for massacres, assassinations and torture. In Guatemala's case, the commission was among the weakest, barred from even mentioning the names of those responsible for these crimes.

The essential purpose of these political arrangements has been to defuse the revolutionary situations in these countries, gaining the collaboration of the dictatorships' opponents in the various self-styled liberation movements, while ensuring that the old repressive forces remain fundamentally intact.

Clinton has made the claim in the course of his tour that the woefully limited US humanitarian efforts in response to Hurricane Mitch are laying the groundwork for a new era of cooperation between Washington and the region.

It seems far more likely, given the deepening poverty and political disaffection of the masses, that the 1998 hurricane will play a similar historical role as the last massive catastrophe in the region, the Nicaraguan earthquake of 1972 that claimed some 6,000 lives and left hundreds of thousands homeless. The devastation brought about by that natural disaster served to fatally undermine the corrupt US-backed Somoza dictatorship, setting the stage for the eruption of revolutionary struggle not only in Nicaragua, but throughout Central America.



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