

Ex-General Otto Perez Molina to expand drug war as Guatemala's new president

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Otto Perez Molina, a former army general accused of war crimes in Guatemala's protracted civil war, assumed office as the country's president Saturday. Outgoing president Alvaro Colom gave his final address to Congress and attended the ceremonial passing of power to Molina at Guatemala's Sport's Dome in the Capital City's Zone 13.

In addition to a reception by Mexican president Felipe Calderon, Perez Molina has been warmly congratulated and endorsed by both Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and President Barack Obama. In fact, the US embassy recognized his victory before the official tally was in last November, when Perez Molina, the candidate of the Patriot Party, defeated his opponent, another right-winger, Manuel Baldizón of the LIDER party.

Despite the fact Perez Molina is unpopular with and even hated by most Guatemalans, his influential sponsors—the US Government, Guatemala's elite families and the country's notorious military forces—have given him a clear mandate to expand the brutal drug war militarization into Central America's most populous nation. There is every reason to believe he'll make good on his ominous campaign promises to impose order with an “iron fist”—his party's symbol.

The newly installed president is wasting no time. He pledged to mobilize the Air Force Special Forces in the drug war and to expand the military by 2,500. However, according to the *Miami Herald*, his top priority is, “ending a long-standing US ban on military aid imposed over concerns about abuses during the Central American country's 36-year civil war.” The *Herald* notes, “Perez wants military equipment to battle Mexican drug traffickers.”

Although the US military has dramatically increased its presence in Guatemala over the last several years via the Mexican drug war, it has had to do so under the fig leaf of an “advisory role,” which prohibits certain types of direct military aid. The act says Guatemala can regain full military aid once the US secretary of state certifies that the military is “respecting internationally recognized human rights” and cooperating with judicial investigations of former military personnel and with the International Commission Against Impunity (CICIG) in Guatemala.

Although the bar to military aid is a legal formality that has

not prevented the US military from setting up and running operations throughout the country, even this pretense will likely come to an end so long as Perez Molina does not sack Attorney General Claudia Paz y Paz Bailey, appointed by Colom in December 2010.

Paz y Paz Bailey, the first female attorney general in the country's history, has been fawned over by the media as a “tough”, apolitical prosecutor cleaning up Guatemala's corrupt “old boy” network. In reality, Bailey's long legal career had been unremarkable until her appointment to the position last year, the same month Alvaro Colom, under the guidance of the US embassy, declared martial law over sections of the country in furtherance of the drug war.

Hillary Clinton has personally met with Paz y Paz Bailey twice in the past six months, awarding her the International Crisis Group's Pursuit of Peace prize. Specifically, Paz y Paz Bailey's cooperation with the United Nations-sponsored CICIG—a UN anti-corruption commission formed to prosecute the drug war in Guatemala—is cited as proof positive that she is the champion of democracy in the country and will keep Perez Molina in check.

Although the work of Paz y Paz Bailey with the CICIG is widely portrayed as the first real effort in decades to hold the Guatemalan military responsible for the horrors and genocide committed against alleged communists in the impoverished indigenous community, its primary function is to subordinate the country's judiciary to world imperialism via the drug war.

The lauded prosecution of war criminals is farcical—only four soldiers have been convicted, while Molina, an intellectual author of the genocide, has seized the country's highest office. However, in her year of service as attorney general, Bailey has prosecuted five times the number of drug traffickers compared to her predecessors.

Nonetheless, Paz y Paz has come under fire from ex-military officers for her token prosecutions of war criminals, but she has quickly capitulated. When several ex-military operatives filed frivolous lawsuits against their accusers, naming as defendants notable human rights activists, academics, outgoing first lady Sandra Torres de Colom and even Paz y Paz Bailey's father and cousins, the attorney general dutifully assigned a special

prosecutor to investigate the charges, accepting them as legitimate.

Molina endorsed her cowardice in a November interview, saying that justice is not merely “persecution of just one side”

In fact, just months before Molina took office, Paz y Paz Bailey initiated her own political prosecution of Gloria Torres—the sister of Sandra Torres de Colom, wife of outgoing president Alvaro Colom—for misappropriation of government contracts. Sandra Torres de Colom, a center-left candidate vilified by Molina in the press for her limited welfare programs, was widely seen as his strongest competitor for the presidency before she was ruled ineligible due to her marriage to Colom.

Molina’s bid for the presidency, however, was given legal sanction, despite the fact that he was being prosecuted for war crimes while a candidate. Specifically, Molina has been pursued by human rights organizations for carrying out the massacre of Mayan Indians in Nebaj, Quiche, in 1982 and 1983. In that case, numerous survivors have described being personally tortured by him.

Moreover, he has been prosecuted for the kidnap, torture and murder of alleged guerilla leader Efraim Bamaca in 1992. In defiance of the repeated rulings against Perez Molina in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, the case has languished in Guatemalan courts.

Unsurprisingly, Molina’s transition team leader, Eduardo Stein, says Molina will keep Paz y Paz Bailey on as attorney general as they “share the same goals.” Nonetheless, the mandates of both Paz y Paz Bailey and the CICIG will automatically expire by 2013 unless they are extended by Congress.

In the face of his leadership role in what can only be described as a holocaust against the country’s indigenous population, the unabashed support for Molina from Washington and Guatemala’s political elite merits a brief review of his past.

Molina, a graduate of the US Army’s School of the Americas, made his military career as an intelligence specialist, one of the most influential sections of the army at the height of the bloody civil war. He is closely associated with the brutal Guatemalan special forces unit known as the Kaibils—a group regularly implicated in heinous massacres during the war. The savagery of this murderous outfit is well documented in the 1998 report “Guatemala Never Again.”

The report found that during the civil war, more than 200,000 people were killed or disappeared, concluding as well that over 90 percent of the violence was perpetrated by the military or right-wing paramilitary forces. It is estimated that 626 massacres were carried out by state security forces, the vast majority against defenseless Mayan Indian communities.

These reports graphically detail atrocities carried out by Kaibil units to instill terror in the Indian population, including rape, torture, amputation, the killing of defenseless children, “often by beating them against walls or throwing them alive

into mass graves where the corpses of adults were later thrown,” and other horrors.

Despite the irrefutable documentary evidence of such crimes, Molina continues to insist the massacres never occurred. Defiant, he has pledged to deploy Kaibils in the drug war, despite accusations that current and former Kaibils are themselves participants in drug trafficking.

Perez Molina has named three former Kaibils to the three top military positions: Col. Ulises Anzueto as defense minister, Col. René Casados Ramírez as commander of the joint chiefs of defense, and Col. Manuel López Ambrosio as sub-commander of the joint chiefs of defense. Two officers have been appointed to cabinet-level positions, including former Colonel Mauricio Lopez Bonilla, who was named interior minister and charged with coordinating the drug war with Mexico.

In a thinly veiled threat to his political rivals, *El Periodico* of Guatemala reported that Perez Molina has announced he will seek to repeal a law that requires five years of police protection for former state officials. Dismissing his own bloody rhetoric about the dangers to politicians in Guatemala, Molina says he would replace the law’s current requirement of police protection with his own assessment of “how well the official did his job” while in office.

The rapid return to militarism in Guatemala is the response of the national bourgeois to Washington’s security agenda for the entire region, which began with Colombia, expanded into Mexico and now seeks a firm foothold on the Central American isthmus. The militarization project is rooted in the global economic crisis that has radicalized millions while sharpening imperialist rivalries.

The selection of a war criminal like Molina stands as a testament to Washington’s desperation in the face of an intractable economic breakdown and a dire warning to workers in Central America—a region recognized as an increasingly valuable source of mineral wealth and an alternative cheap labor platform within close proximity to the US.

Throughout the region, governments are exerting themselves to impose police state measures at the behest of their sponsors in Washington. Just this year, Honduras ordered the army into the streets of its cities in March, El Salvador has done the same, and even Costa Rica has set in motion a significant increase in police forces over the next four years. In addition, the US and Colombia are establishing in Panama a joint training center for police forces from throughout the region, recalling the nightmarish School of the Americas.



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