

Latin American governments “apologize” for dictatorships’ crimes

Bill Van Auken
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El Salvador’s President Mauricio Funes this week delivered a formal apology in the name of the Salvadoran state for one of the most horrific crimes of that country’s 12-year civil war: the El Mozote massacre of December 1981.

“Countless acts of barbarism and violations of human rights were committed here,” Funes said in a speech delivered in Meanguerra, a municipality in Morazan Province, where the village of El Mozote was located. The occasion was the 20th anniversary of signing of a peace accord between the government and the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Movement (FMLN).

In reality, the number of victims at El Mozote and its surrounding area is known, placed at 966 through forensic investigations that identified over 700 of those massacred, while the remains of the rest were dismembered or burned beyond recognition. All of the victims were poor, unarmed and unresisting; the majority of those killed were children.

A United Nations-sponsored “truth commission” issued an account of the massacre in 1992, stating: “On 10 December 1981, in the village of El Mozote in the Department of Morazan, units of the Atlacatl Battalion detained, without resistance, all the men, women and children who were in the place. The following day, 11 December, after spending the night locked in their homes, they were deliberately and systematically executed in groups. First, the men were tortured and executed, then the women were executed and, lastly, the children, in the place where they had been locked up....”

More detailed accounts spoke of women—as well as girls as young as ten—being gang-raped and then machine-gunned or bayoneted to death by troops, of children cut to pieces with machetes and hung from

trees and bodies piled up and burned.

The government of El Salvador did not act alone in carrying out these crimes. The Atlacatl Battalion was “made in the USA”, a murderous creation of the Pentagon. In its leadership were graduates of the US military’s infamous School of the Americas, then located in Panama; the battalion as a whole received training from US Special Forces units at Fort Bragg, North Carolina before being unleashed on the Salvadoran people. US Special Forces advisors operated with the unit in El Salvador, and, according to some accounts, were present during the December 1981 massacre.

Far from apologizing for the bloodbath carried out by the counterinsurgency battalion that it had organized and trained, Washington defended its actions, claiming that the reports of the El Mozote massacre were nothing more than “communist propaganda”, and that the unit itself was a model of respect for human rights

What is the significance Funes’s apology on behalf of the state for such crimes?

This is not just a Salvadoran issue. In Uruguay this week, Foreign Minister Luis Almagro announced that the government of President Jose Mujica will stage a similar formal apology for the crimes carried out by the dictatorship that ruled that country between 1973 and 1985.

In Uruguay’s case, the apology is being staged to comply with the decision of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in a case brought by Macarena Gelman—the granddaughter of Argentine poet Juan Gelman—whose entire life was shaped by the savage repression that swept Latin America’s southern cone in the 1970s.

Macarena’s parents were abducted by security forces in 1976 in Argentina, where her father, Juan Gelman’s

son Marcelo, was tortured and murdered in a clandestine detention center. Her mother, Maria Claudia Garcia, then just 19 and pregnant, was sent to Uruguay as part of Operation Condor, a joint plan for repression and murder worked out between the region's dictatorships and the CIA. She disappeared after giving birth to Macarena, who was turned over to a policeman's family and only learned her true identity in 2000.

Macarena and her grandfather then sought through the Uruguayan courts to discover her mother's fate and identify who was responsible. They were blocked at every turn by the so-called law of impunity.

In complying with the Inter-American Court's decision, the Uruguayan government said it would apologize to the Gelmans as representatives of the thousands upon thousands of Uruguayans who were murdered, tortured, disappeared and forced into exile under the dictatorship.

A common thread runs through the formal state apologies in Uruguay and El Salvador. In the first country, President Mujica is a former member of the Tupamaro guerrilla movement, which transformed itself into a political party after the end of the dictatorship. In El Salvador, Funes came to power as the candidate of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Movement, which went through a similar process after the signing of the Salvadoran peace accords 20 years ago.

Thus, the former Tupamaro Mujica and the candidate of the FMLN Funes are offering formal apologies for repression carried out by military forces that sought the extermination of these two guerrilla movements.

Both governments—routinely referred to as “leftist” in the mass media—have upheld amnesties dictated by their respective countries' security forces, granting impunity to those responsible for the massacres, murders, torture, disappearances and theft of babies. Similar pacts were put in place in Argentina, Brazil and virtually everywhere else in Latin America where the so-called transition to civilian rule was carried out.

Given this protection of state criminals who have been allowed to live unmolested into retirement, the state apologies—coming three and four decades after the crimes committed—ring hollow.

In making their apologies, moreover, both speak as custodians of the state apparatus that carried out these

crimes, which includes the same repressive forces and defends the same social interests: those of the Salvadoran and Uruguayan capitalist elites, as well as the transnational banks and corporations.

In the end, these apologies constitute one more attempt to bury the past, but only confirm that the atrocities committed in the 1970s and 1980s were not merely the work of generals, colonels, torturers and assassins who carried them out. They were the response of the ruling classes of these countries and of US imperialism to a revolutionary challenge from below. Given a resurgence of revolutionary struggle under the impact of the global capitalist crisis, the same states issuing apologies today will return to similar methods tomorrow.

Indeed, in Central America, there are already indications of a re-militarization of the state with strong US backing and under the cover of the “war on drugs.” Funes himself has installed a retired general as minister of Public Security, while removing former FMLN commanders from positions in the security apparatus, apparently to meet conditions set by Washington for receiving aid under a new Central American Regional Security Initiative.

In Guatemala, retired general Otto Pérez Molina, charged with war crimes in the genocidal repression unleashed in that country in the 1980s, was recently inaugurated as president, promising to rule with an “iron hand” and bringing many veterans of the dirty war with him.

And in Honduras last month, President Porfirio Lobo introduced a constitutional amendment that would allow the use of the armed forces to police Honduran streets.

The bringing to account of those responsible for the atrocities of the past and preventing their recurrence is in the end a task of the working class of Latin America, fighting together with workers in the US and internationally to put an end to the capitalist system which is the source of these crimes.



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