

PAINTING THE MAYA RED  
Military Doctrine and Speech in Guatemala's Genocidal Acts  
By Frank Smyth

The bloodshed woven through the fabric of Guatemalan society remains a rarely told story. One reason for the ongoing lack of attention is the impunity that has long seeped through the northern Central American nation. Senior military officers were the engineers of Guatemala's worst abuses. But no more than a literal handful were ever brought to justice for any crimes, and many continue to operate above the law today. At the same time, human rights monitors who have tried to unravel the past have themselves been murdered, tortured or threatened one after another over decades in what appears to be an ongoing campaign of organized intimidation.

The timing and location of much of the violence is another factor that has helped keep the story in the dark. The largest massacres took place more than a quarter century ago in remote, highland regions among indigenous communities whose first language was not Guatemala's national one of Spanish but different Mayan dialects. Not only were local and foreign journalists alike denied independent access to the war zones, but the United States, which was by then increasing involvement in El Salvador and other Central American nations, was not providing enough overt aid to Guatemala at the time to generate much interest in the foreign press.

The United States was one of several nations providing Guatemala with covert aid, however, as the nation's military was carrying out major human rights violations. The complicity of foreign governments in assisting and training the Guatemalan Armed Forces may be an additional reason that Guatemala has still not drawn more international focus. Then-President Bill Clinton traveled to Guatemala City in 1999 to all but apologize for the roles played more than a decade before by the CIA and other U.S. intelligence agencies in the nation's Cold War-era carnage. But even this unprecedented act of contrition by a sitting U.S. President received relatively little attention.

Guatemala still receives scant press today even as credible observers wonder out loud if the nation is in danger of becoming a failed state.<sup>1</sup> In recent decades, Guatemala (not unlike Mexico just north of its border on the isthmus) has been an increasingly important hub for drug trafficking and other organized crimes. Some of Guatemala's chief criminal suspects include retired military officers who helped plan operations leading to many of the nation's most widespread human rights abuses back during the Cold War.

Genocide is a specific, legal term no one should use lightly. No genocide per se ever took place in Guatemala. But the Guatemalan military did commit "acts of

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<sup>1</sup> "Guatemala: the next to fall?" by Mark Schneider, GlobalPost.com, April 16, 2009 (<http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/worldview/090416/guatemala-the-next-fall>). See also the testimony by Mr. Schneider, Vice President of the International Crisis Group, before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, June 9, 2009.

genocide,” according to the U.N. Commission for Historical Clarification (of Violence that Caused Suffering to the Guatemalan People). The acts did not meet the threshold of genocide as they were not attempts to exterminate the nation’s indigenous Mayans, who comprise the majority of the nation’s population. But the acts did involve the wholesale annihilation of men, women and children in hundreds of ethnic Mayan communities.<sup>2</sup>

The military only targeted those specific villages which authorities deemed to be supportive, or potentially supportive of one or another of the nation’s Marxist insurgencies. But, within those villages, the military in many if not most cases targeted the village population en masse. According to the U.N. commission:

[T]he aim of the perpetrators was to kill the largest number of group members possible. Prior to practically all these killings, the Army carried out at least one of the following preparatory actions: carefully gathering the whole community together; surrounding the community; or utilizing situations in which the people were gathered together for celebrations or market days.<sup>3</sup>

The nation’s various leftist guerrilla groups, for their part, committed many serious atrocities against civilians including indigenous people, especially selective assassinations of suspected military informants in 1982. But the U.N. commission concluded that 93 percent of Guatemala’s war-time abuses were committed by the Guatemalan state or by military or paramilitary forces under direct military control. Both the U.N. commission report as well as another exhaustive study by the Guatemalan Catholic Church documented the role of the Guatemalan military intelligence services, in particular, in organizing systematic human rights violations.<sup>4</sup>

Hateful discourse including doctrine and speech each played a role in Guatemala, but perhaps in different ways from other cases of modern genocide or genocidal acts. In Nazi Germany in the late 1930s and early 1940s, in the former Yugoslavia in the late 1980s and 1990s, and in Rwanda in the early to mid-1990s, racist doctrine and speech was developed for dissemination among both loyal political cadre and the public at large. Whereas, in Guatemala, the doctrine and speech was not disseminated to reach the entire

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<sup>2</sup> U.N. Commission for Historical Clarification, 1999, paragraphs 108 – 122. (Only portions of the report have been translated into English by the American Association for the Advancement of Science; see <http://shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ceh/report/english/toc.html>, and also *Quiet Genocide: Guatemala 1981 – 1983*, edited by Etelle Higonnet, Transactions Publishers, 2009. The original U.N. report in Spanish is titled *La Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico*, and it is posted at <http://shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ceh/mds/spanish/toc.html>.)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., paragraph 113.

<sup>4</sup> The Catholic Church report went further than the U.N. report in identifying the forces responsible for the violence. See Chapter 7, “The Intelligence behind the Violence,” in *Guatemala Never Again! Recovery of the Historical Memory Project, The Official Report of the Human Rights Office*, Archdiocese of Guatemala, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1999, pp. 105 -- 114. This is a condensed, English version of the original, four-volume report published in Spanish as, *Guatemala: Nunca Más: Informe Proyecto Interdiocesano de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica*, Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala, 1998 (<http://www.odhag.org.gt/03publicns.htm>); the Catholic Church study is also often referred to by the acronym of its subtitle in Spanish as the REMHI report.

nation, but was instead directed either at different groups of military personnel, or at select groups of civilians, namely villagers, living under partial or full military control.

Scholars studying other cases have noted the primacy of military institutions in carrying out genocides or genocidal acts.

Perhaps the greatest source of power in an oppressive society in times of war is the military establishment that is identified with the authorities in charge. To the extent that the outcome of the war hinges on military performance, military authorities will require inordinate power and, accordingly, will be catapulted into relative predominance. Genocide not only requires opportunistic decision-making, its execution depends on functional efficiency. In addition to planning and administering the logistics involved, there has to be a command-and-control set up to ensure a reasonably smooth operation.<sup>5</sup>

The same scholar, Vahakn N. Dadrian, quoted above further noted the key roles played by ideology and its indoctrination among military forces in genocides including the Holocaust by Nazi Germany and the Armenian slaughter by Turkish forces.

In both cases of genocide, the military played a crucial role. Involved were not just regular officers but officers who were intensely committed to the respective ideologies and goals of the Nazis and *Ittihadists*. Within this framework of loyalty and dedication, they performed critical staff work, maintained secrecy and discipline, and participated in field operations as commanders of killer bands. Such terms as ‘Nazi officers’ and ‘*Ittihadist* officers’ are descriptive of the potentially lethal process of indoctrinating military officers with political party credos and teachings and, in general, of politicizing the military or segments of it.<sup>6</sup>

In Guatemala, the military officer corps developed different types of language to indoctrinate military personnel and other select groups. Commanding officers and others prepared a written doctrine for their own cadre of senior officers. The Army further developed colloquial speech to disseminate the same ideas down to non-commission officers and soldiers. Field officers and soldiers were then ordered to communicate similar language to individuals and communities among the civilian population.

The discourse at all levels served to justify violence against civilians. No matter the forum, the doctrine as well as speech shifted the onus of blame for atrocities from the military perpetrators to the civilian victims. The language in each case served to dehumanize civilians especially ethnic Mayans suspected of supporting the nation’s

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<sup>5</sup> “The Comparative Aspects of the Armenian and Jewish Cases of Genocide: A Sociohistorical Perspective,” by Vahakn N. Dadrian, in Is the Holocaust Unique?: Perspectives on Comparative Genocide, edited by Alan S. Rosenbaum, Westview Press, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Marxist guerrillas. The rationalizations in the speech may have also helped field officers, soldiers as well as paramilitaries overcome their own moral and emotional reservations at either ordering, or carrying out orders to brutalize civilians including women and children.

Scholar Scott Straus (a contributor to this study) has documented the roles played by fear and, in particular, military-backed, intra-ethnic intimidation as a driving force behind Rwanda's 1994 genocide.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in Guatemala in the late 1970s and early 1980s, another purpose of the military discourse was to sow fear within ethnic Mayan communities among the majority indigenous population. The Army used violence and intimidation to divide indigenous people into two basic camps --either for co-optation or destruction-- based on their perceived political loyalties. Moreover, during many violent Army campaigns against civilians, field officers regularly made speeches telling paramilitaries and surviving civilians alike that those who were killed or abused deserved their plight, and that anyone who failed to embrace the military would suffer the same fate.

The military discourse in Guatemala also played upon existing racism among society against ethnic Mayans and others. The nation has long suffered a hierarchy of prejudice. Most large landowners and their families are of European including notably German descent;<sup>8</sup> the nation's traditional elite, as a class, has looked down at the country's *Ladinos* as well as ethnic Mayans. (*Ladino* is a term specific to Guatemala that refers to people of either mixed race or indigenous descent who have abandoned Mayan dress for Western clothing.) *Ladinos*, in turn, have largely looked down at the nation's majority Mayans, who have long worn traditional costumes.

The Army exploited the prejudice to not only facilitate violence, but to break down the cultural cohesion of Mayan communities to make them more amenable to military goals. Found the U.N. commission:

[I]n the majority of cases, the identification of Mayan communities with the insurgency was intentionally exaggerated by the State, which, based on traditional racist prejudices, used this identification to eliminate any present or future possibilities of the people providing help for, or joining, an insurgent project.

The consequence of this manipulation...was massive and indiscriminate aggression directed against communities independent of their actual involvement in the guerrilla movement and with a clear indifference to their status as a non-combatant civilian population. The massacres, scorched earth operations, forced disappearances and executions of Mayan authorities, leaders and spiritual guides, were not only an attempt to

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<sup>7</sup> The Order of Genocide: Race, Power and War in Rwanda, by Scott Straus, Cornell University Press, 2008, pp. 122 -- 152.

<sup>8</sup> German landownership dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century; see the chapter "Coffee Republics," in Central America: A Nation Divided, by Ralph Lee Woodward, Jr., Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 149 – 176.

destroy the social base of the guerrillas, but above all, to destroy the cultural values that ensured cohesion and collective action in Mayan communities.<sup>9</sup>

The Guatemalan Army was successful on its own terms. The scale of the violence remains staggering.

More than 200,000 people were killed or forcibly disappeared in Guatemala, largely back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, according to the U.N. commission. This is a toll about twice the size of the total number of people estimated to have died throughout the rest of Central America combined during the region's war-torn 1980s.<sup>10</sup> The documented toll in Guatemala is about the same as the total number of people believed to have died throughout the 1990s in the Balkans wars.<sup>11</sup> And it is comparable to the overall number of people estimated to have died from the early- to mid-2000s in the Darfur region of Sudan from violence as well as the effects of displacement due to violent attacks including disease, hunger and exposure.<sup>12</sup>

Guatemala's toll is far smaller, however, than the 800,000 people who died in Rwanda during that nation's 1994 genocide over a much shorter period of time. (The two nation's populations are of nearly comparable size.) Guatemala back in the early 1980s had about eight million people. (The nation has since grown to thirteen million.) Guatemala's toll from the period would be the equivalent of killing more than seven million people today in the United States.

A remarkably large percentage of Guatemala's victims were women and children.

"[A] large number of children" were among "the direct victims of arbitrary execution, forced disappearance, torture, rape and other violations," reported the U.N. commission.<sup>13</sup> "[A] large number of children" were also "orphaned and abandoned, especially among the Mayan population, who saw their families destroyed and the possibility of living a normal childhood within the norms of their culture, lost."

At the same time, "approximately a quarter of the direct victims of human rights violations and acts of violence were women," reported the U.N. commission. "They were

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<sup>9</sup> U.N. Commission for Historical Clarification, paragraph 31.

<sup>10</sup> Most estimates cite a death toll of 70,000 in El Salvador, 20,000 in Nicaragua, and hundreds in Honduras. See, for example, "Reagan and Guatemala's Death Files," by Robert Parry, ConsortiumNews.com (<http://www.consortiumnews.com/1999/052699a1.html>).

<sup>11</sup> "Crime of Crimes: Does It Have to be Genocide for the World to Act?" by David Bosco, The Washington Post, March 6, 2006 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A9102-2005Mar5.html>). See also the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's Committee on Conscience (the host of this study) website and figures that are also cited in the above article ([http://www.ushmm.org/genocide/take\\_action/](http://www.ushmm.org/genocide/take_action/)).

<sup>12</sup> "Overview: Darfur, Sudan," part of "Preventing Genocide: Learn More & Take Action," U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum website ([http://www.ushmm.org/genocide/take\\_action/atrisk/region/darfur-sudan/](http://www.ushmm.org/genocide/take_action/atrisk/region/darfur-sudan/)).

<sup>13</sup> U.N. Commission for Historical Clarification, paragraph 28.

killed, tortured and raped, sometimes because of their ideals and political or social participation, sometimes in massacres or other indiscriminate acts.”<sup>14</sup>

The Human Rights Office of the Guatemalan Catholic Archdiocese produced its own exhaustive report of the nation’s war-time violence titled, *Never Again! Recovery of the Historical Memory Project*. “Half of the massacres recorded include the collective murder of children,” reported the Catholic church. “In keeping with the indiscriminate violence of massacres, descriptions of children’s deaths often contain atrocities (incineration, machete wounds, and drawing and quartering, and most frequently, severe head trauma). Many young girls were raped during massacres or while detained.”<sup>15</sup>

Civilian victims of Army abuses were systematically subjected to such cruelty. Found the U.N. commission:

In the majority of massacres there is evidence of multiple acts of savagery, which preceded, accompanied or occurred after the death of the victims. Acts such as the killing of defenseless children, often by beating them against walls or throwing them alive into pits where the corpses of adults were later thrown; the amputation of limbs; the impaling of victims; the killing of persons by covering them in petrol and burning them alive; the extraction, in the presence of others, of the viscera of victims who were still alive; the confinement of people who had been mortally tortured, in agony for days; the opening of the wombs of pregnant women, and other similarly atrocious acts.<sup>16</sup>

Nor was the violence gratuitous, at least not in the eyes of its military intelligence planners. “Human rights violations have been used as a strategy of social control in Guatemala,” found the Catholic Church historical memory report which is based on the testimony of survivors as well as perpetrators. “More than simply a byproduct of armed confrontation, terror has been the goal of a counterinsurgency policy that utilized different means at different times (fear is the effect most frequently reported in the testimonies).”<sup>17</sup>

GUATEMALA’S military struggle was nearly the last hot conflict of the Cold War, formally ending in 1996 seven years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Nearly a century before, the same small, tropical country was one of the Central American nations that helped give rise to the term “Banana Republic.”<sup>18</sup>

Guatemala’s civil war broke out in the early 1960s as Marxist guerrilla movements inspired, and to some degree supported, by revolutionary Cuba were

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., paragraph 29.

<sup>15</sup> *Guatemala Never Again!*, page 30.

<sup>16</sup> *U.N. Commission for Historical Clarification*, paragraph 87.

<sup>17</sup> *Guatemala Never Again!*, page 4.

<sup>18</sup> See the chapter “Banana Republics” in *Central America: A Nation Divided*, pp. 177 – 202.

spreading throughout Latin America. In Guatemala, leftist insurgencies found fertile terrain in economic conditions marked by one of the most inequitable distributions of arable land ownership in Latin America along with widespread poverty for the overwhelming majority of Guatemalans. The guerrillas also took root not long after an unprecedented, ten-year-long period of elected democratic rule was replaced by a military dictatorship.

The end of World War II and wane of European fascism helped fuel demands for democratic and other reforms in many Latin American nations including Guatemala. Guatemalans eventually elected Jacobo Arbenz, a left-leaning, reform-minded leader who nationalized lands including those of the U.S.-firm United Fruit, and who also secretly received arms from then-communist Czechoslovakia. The CIA organized his overthrow in 1954 through a coup.<sup>19</sup>

One military regime after another occupied the National Palace in Guatemala City for more than thirty ensuing years. During this period from 1954 to 1986 the military's main claim to legitimacy was its role in keeping at bay the nation's various perceived and real subversives. The armed insurgents who emerged by the early 1960s were a mix of traditional communist and so-called "new left" guerrillas. Often operating through political front groups, the guerrillas organized students, workers and intellectuals in cities, and mainly landless, wage-earning farm workers in the countryside.<sup>20</sup>

The tide began turning against especially urban Guatemalan leftists in the late 1970s during the military government led by Gen. Romeo Lucas García. The methods used were so abusive that the U.S. administration led by President Jimmy Carter cut-off at least all overt U.S. military training and aid. The Guatemalan military strengthened ties with other partners and patrons in response. Taiwan and Israel provided political warfare and counter-terrorism training, respectively.<sup>21</sup> Israel provided weapons from state-of-the-art armored vehicles to Galil automatic rifles;<sup>22</sup> the Israeli Galil remains the Guatemalan Army's signature small arm.

At the same time, a debate began to emerge within the ranks of the Guatemalan officer corps that had profound consequences for the nation. The Guatemalan military

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<sup>19</sup> For a definitive account of the period see Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States 1944-1954, by Piero Gleijeses, Princeton University Press, 1991; a thorough treatment of the coup itself can also be found in Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq, by Stephen Kinzer, Times Books, 2006, pp. 129 –147; see also Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA, by Tim Weiner, Anchor Books, 2008, pp. 106 – 119.

<sup>20</sup> See The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads and U.S. Power, by Susanne Jonas, Westview Press, 1991 pp. 131 – 144; and Gift of the Devil: A History of Guatemala, by Jim Handy, South End Press, 1984, pp. 205 -- 222.

<sup>21</sup> See "Taiwan's Central American Links," by Joel Millman, Jane's Defence Weekly, November 26, 1988; and the interviews with former U.S. official and counterinsurgency expert César Sereseres and Guatemalan Army General Héctor Alejandro Gramajo Morales quoted in The Guatemalan Military Project: A Violence Called Democracy, by Jennifer Schirmer, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998, on pages 59 and 172, respectively. The book is the authoritative work on the Guatemalan military.

<sup>22</sup> See "Israelis Said to Step Up Role as Arms Suppliers to Latins," by Leslie H. Gelb, The New York Times, December 17, 1982.

made the decision to pursue its own approach to the country's various leftist insurgencies, choosing a strategy that turned concerns about the military's human rights record on its head. Not only did the military choose to ignore the Carter administration's human rights complaints. But the military officers who would soon emerge as the operational leaders of the institution chose to make human rights violations themselves the cornerstone of their counterinsurgency strategy.<sup>23</sup>

Anti-communism has roots as old as the 1930s in Guatemala interwoven with the nation's traditional religious and conservative values. But the rhetoric only escalated after the CIA-organized coup in 1954, and again after the appearance in 1962 of the nation's first Marxist guerrillas. By then the United States was beginning to train armed forces throughout Latin America to "control communism [and] subversion," in the words of then-President John F. Kennedy, "and to teach them how to control mobs and fight guerrillas."<sup>24</sup>

The Guatemalan military, which as an institution interchangeably refers to itself as the Guatemalan Armed Forces or the Guatemalan Army, later broadened the notion of subversion or "internal enemy" to include two types of targeted actors: armed guerrilla combatants along with the civilians suspected of supporting them.

"Those non-communists who still seek to disturb the internal order are equally enemies," reads the Guatemalan Army's 1978 Counterinsurgency War Manual. It was the first such document to call for the "physical elimination" of "people ideologically compromised even if they are not participating in terrorist acts or [guerrilla] war operations."<sup>25</sup>

By then the Army was painting all its perceived enemies in the countryside and in the cities, from peasants to academics, from catechists to journalists, with a red brush. "The inclusion of all opponents under one banner, democratic or otherwise, pacifist or guerrilla, legal or illegal, communist or non-communist, served to justify numerous and serious crimes," concluded the U.N. commission. "The State also tried to stigmatize and blame the victims and the country's social organizations, making them into criminals in the public eye and thus into 'legitimate' targets for repression."<sup>26</sup>

All kinds of Guatemalans were targeted. But 83 percent of the victims were ethnic Mayans and 17 percent were *Ladinos*, according to the U.N. commission.<sup>27</sup> One military officer, looking back at the late 1970s, recognized the dire socio-economic conditions that made the highland indigenous population vulnerable to insurgent influence. "The [indigenous] communities are living in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and, because of it, it is possible

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<sup>23</sup> See The Guatemalan Military Project chapters 1 "A Brief History of the Guatemalan Military's Rise to Power" and 2 "Anatomy of the Counterinsurgency I: From Tactical to Strategic Pacification," pp. 9 – 63.

<sup>24</sup> "National Security Action Memorandum, No. 88," to Secretary of Defense (Robert McNamara) by President John F. Kennedy, September 5, 1961, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum (<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/NSAMs.htm>).

<sup>25</sup> Resumen, Manual de Guerra Contrasubversiva, Ejército de Guatemala, Marzo 1978, página 1.

<sup>26</sup> U.N. Commission for Historical Clarification, paragraph 49.

<sup>27</sup> U.N. Commission for Historical Clarification, Conclusions, I 1.



to implant revolutionary ideas as a solution to their daily necessities,” wrote the officer in a Guatemalan military paper. “The social, economic, political and military isolation of the region is what makes the implantation of the Maoist theory ‘the fish is to water what the population is to the guerrilla.’”<sup>28</sup>

The metaphor paraphrases an often quoted statement by the late Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong: the guerrilla must move among the people as a fish swims in the sea. The Guatemalan military inverted the notion first in theory and then in practice to drain the sea to kill the fish.

The nation’s highland Mayans had long been disenfranchised from the rest of the nation. Many were fluent in only one of 22 or so indigenous dialects instead of Spanish. At the same time, the concentration of land ownership, which was also increasingly geared toward export agriculture, left many indigenous *campesinos* without enough subsistence plots or steady income to support their families.

The military continued to recognize the impact of such factors. “The [guerrillas] base of social support is seated among the indigenous peasants and their flag is planted in their various dialects,” according to a 1982 Guatemalan military high command operations plan.<sup>29</sup> “The overwhelming majority of indigenous people in the nation’s Highlands have found their causes of land scarcity [and] immense poverty echoed in the proclamations of the subversion, and, after many years of indoctrination, they see the Army as an enemy invader.”<sup>30</sup>

But the acknowledgement in the end only led the military to favor nearly blanket extermination. “Our conduct in the military operations must be directed at negating the access of the guerrillas to the civilian population which nurtures them and in which they hide,” reads a military operations plan in 1982.<sup>31</sup> The same report goes on:

Subversion exists, because a small group of people supported it, and a large number of people tolerated it, either out of fear or because there are causes that give rise to it. The war has to be fought on all fronts...The mind of the population is the main objective.<sup>32</sup>

But trying to win over the civilian population’s so-called hearts and minds, as the United States attempted to do to some degree, for example, in Vietnam, was never Guatemala’s strategy. Instead its Army used the tools of violence and terror to either destroy or deter civilians from lending support to any group but the Armed Forces.

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<sup>28</sup> “Medidas para Recuperar La Población en Resistencia,” Teniente Coronel Alvaro Rivas, 1990, página 28.

<sup>29</sup> “Plan de Campaña, ‘Victoria 82,’” Apéndice A al Anexo F OPSIC, párrafos 4.4 y 4.5, página 30.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., Anexo F OPSIC, párrafo 2, página 29.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., Anexo H (Ordenes Permanentes Para el Desarrollo de Operaciones Contra Subversivas), Sección G (Actitud Military en Operaciones Contrsubversivas), párrafo 2.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., Apéndice H; also quoted in Guatemala Never Again!, page 229.

The CIA informed senior Reagan administration officials of the Guatemalan military's intentions. One "Secret" 1982 CIA cable discusses the situation in the Ixil-speaking Mayan population of the Quiché highland department, which at the time was dominated by one particular guerrilla group, the Guerrilla Army of the Poor, known by its acronym in Spanish, EGP.

"The well documented belief by the Army that the entire Ixil is pro-EGP has created a situation in which the Army can be expected to give no quarter to combatants and non-combatants alike."<sup>33</sup>

But one does not need to read contemporaneous U.S. intelligence cables to grasp the Guatemalan military's thinking. In January 1982, Chief of Staff Gen. Benedicto Lucas García (who was the brother of the higher-ranking general leading Guatemala at the time) gave an interview to *The Washington Post* conducted in part with a correspondent on a rare, guided tour from inside a military helicopter flying over highland terrain. Chief of Staff Lucas explained not only how the EGP leftist guerrillas had gained support among Mayan communities, but how men, women and children were each playing different parts in the insurgent campaign.

"The EGP began to work in 1976, to indoctrinate the people and form what are called familial nuclei, where the husband acts as the combatant, the wife as the collaborator in all that the term implies –supply, preparation of food and everything—and the children from 8 to about 15 are agents of theirs who harass the Army with homemade grenades." Gen. Lucas went on, "Then there are irregular local forces that also aid the guerrillas and warn them of the Army's coming."<sup>34</sup>

Gen. Lucas told *The Washington Post* what the military needed to do to regain control of these areas: "Of course, these people are difficult to distinguish from most of the rest of the population, but these organizational bases have to be won over or wiped out. Because of that, well, the population suffers."

The violence only escalated two months later after a March 1982 coup by young intelligence officers who chose as their figurehead an older officer named Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt. (Gen. Montt didn't last, but the young intelligence officers who brought him to office remained in power.<sup>35</sup>) Army intelligence officers used four different colors of pins on a map in the high command headquarters and department garrisons, reported author George Black, to designate different levels of suspected subversive influence. Red pins marked those villages targeted for annihilation. Pink and yellow pins indicated

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<sup>33</sup> "Counterinsurgency Operations in El Quiché," CIA cable, February 1982, posted under "The Guatemalan Military: What the U.S. Files Reveal, Volume II: The Documents," by the National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 32.

<sup>34</sup> "Escalating Violence Besieges Central America; Guatemalan War Grows Fiercer," by Christopher Dickey, *The Washington Post*, January 22, 1982.

<sup>35</sup> See *The Guatemalan Military Project*, pp. 26 – 29.

greater and lesser levels of suspicion, respectively. Green pins showed villages considered friendly to the Army.<sup>36</sup>

Many red pins dotted the Ixil-speaking areas along with other parts of the department of Quiché. Besides being influenced by Marxist ideology, Catholic catechists inspired by liberation theology were active in Quiché in organizing so-called base Christian communities to collectively address social and economic issues.<sup>37</sup> Catholic clergy and catechists were among those targeted in Quiché, leading the church in 1982 to literally abandon the province.

Formerly secret Guatemalan Army platoon reports provide direct documentation about Army abuses in Quiché after the March 1982 coup; they were recently entered into evidence in a criminal case filed against former senior Guatemalan military leaders in a Spanish court in Madrid. “A woman was found hiding in a ditch and realizing her presence, the point man fired, killing her and two ‘chocolates,’” according to one platoon report from mid-1982. The “chocolates” referred to two children she was protecting.<sup>38</sup>

The Army also targeted entire villages. A July 1982 massacre in San Francisco in Huehuetenango province was later documented by the U.N. commission,<sup>39</sup> but it was first documented by a Guatemalan Jesuit priest and anthropologist named Ricardo Falla.

At about 1:00 p.m., the soldiers began to fire at the women inside the small church. The majority did not die there, but were separated from their children, taken to their homes in groups, and killed, the majority apparently with machetes. It seems that the purpose of this last parting of women from their children was to prevent even the children from witnessing any confession that might reveal the location of the guerrillas.

Then they returned to kill the children, whom they had left crying and screaming by themselves, without their mothers. Our informants, who were locked up in the courthouse, could see this through a hole in the window and through the doors carefully left open by a guard. The soldiers

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<sup>36</sup> Garrison Guatemala, by George Black with Milton Jamail and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, Monthly Review Press, 1984, pp. 134 – 136.

<sup>37</sup> See Quiché Rebelde: Religious Conversion, Politics, and Ethnic Identity in Guatemala, by Ricardo Falla, University of Texas Press, 2001.

<sup>38</sup> “Reporte de Patrulla,” Secreto, por El Subteniente de Infantería, Comandante de la Patrulla Escocia IV, Victor Hugo Mazariegos. This is a six-page, hand-written report that appears as page 201 out of 359 pages of the full set of formerly secret documents pertaining to “Operation Sofía” in Quiché department in 1982; the document was obtained (like every other Guatemalan military document not otherwise attributed and cited in this article) by the National Security Archive of George Washington University ([http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB297/Operation\\_Sofia\\_lo.pdf](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB297/Operation_Sofia_lo.pdf)); the same platoon document was first quoted in “Court Papers Detail Killings by the Military in Guatemala,” by Elisabeth Malkin, The New York Times, December 3, 2009.

<sup>39</sup> La Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, párrafo 794.

cut open the children's stomachs with knives or they grabbed the children's little legs and smashed their heads with heavy sticks.<sup>40</sup>

Throughout Guatemala, by 1984, no less than 440 highland Mayan villages were destroyed.<sup>41</sup> Overall, the military razed between 70 and 90 percent of villages in targeted areas, burning homes and fields and destroying property in addition to targeting inhabitants.<sup>42</sup> Hundreds of thousands of surviving ethnic Mayans went on the run. Some fled across the border into Mexico. Others migrated to Guatemala's northernmost jungle regions where they lived as displaced, wandering communities constantly trying to outpace the Guatemalan Army.

Their clothes gave them away. The region's Mayans have long worn traditional costumes imbued with cultural symbolism, emotional resonance and spiritual beliefs. Women, especially, have long worn colorful, hand-embroidered outfits including *huipils* or smock-like shirts and matching skirts and sometimes a headdress. Each particular Mayan linguistic group wears its own easily identifiable color scheme. Every single village has its own signature embroidery pattern.

Many Mayans from targeted villages stopped wearing traditional clothes in the wake of Army attacks. Refugees had less money to buy thread and dyes and less time to hand weave. But the colors and patterns of the costumes themselves could be deadly to wear. "In light of the symbolism," noted the Catholic Church report, "and sense of identity associated with traditional dress, particularly for women, its loss is more than a material one and must be understood in terms of personal dignity."<sup>43</sup>

GUATEMALA'S *GENOCIDAIRES*, to borrow the term coined in French for Rwanda's 1994 perpetrators, remain at large in Guatemala. They continue to enjoy impunity for not only past abuses but also for more recent alleged crimes including multi-ton level drug trafficking.<sup>44</sup>

The risks involved in trying to interview former Guatemalan military personnel and others make for challenging research. But the available evidence includes interviews by this author, testimonies included in the U.N. commission report and the Catholic Church historical memory report, as well as contemporaneous Guatemalan military documents. The evidence helps establish how military doctrine and speech was

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<sup>40</sup> Ricardo Falla, account of the July 17, 1982 massacre at San Francisco, Nentón, Hueheutenango, quoted in *The Battle for Guatemala*, pp. 145 – 146; see also Falla's *Quiché Rebelde*.

<sup>41</sup> The Guatemalan military itself admitted the destruction of 440 villages as part its counter-insurgency efforts. For a detailed, quantitative analysis of violence in Guatemala during this period and throughout the war see *State Violence in Guatemala, 1960-1996: A Quantitative Reflection*, by Patrick Ball, Paul Kobrak, and Herbert F. Spierer, American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1999, also available online (<http://shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ciidh/gr/english/index.html>).

<sup>42</sup> *U.N. Commission for Historical Clarification*, paragraph 116.

<sup>43</sup> *Guatemala Never Again!*, p. 49.

<sup>44</sup> See "The Untouchable Narco-State: Guatemala's Military Defies the DEA," by Frank Smyth, *The Texas Observer*, November 18, 2005 (<http://www.texasobserver.org/article.php?aid=2071>).

disseminated down through the ranks from officers to non-commissioned officers, and from non-commissioned officers to soldiers and paramilitaries as well as to civilians. The evidence further shows how the Army fully integrated the discourse into military operations involving abuses in targeted villages.

A classified Army report from the Ixil region of Quiché in 1982 shows how much importance the military placed on what it refers to as propaganda. “[I]t is of urgent necessity to mentally penetrate the ideological field,” reads the report by an operations commander in Quiché department during a period of massacres. “Likewise, it is necessary to establish a Psychological Operations team,” the operations report goes on. “Our military actions must be accompanied by much propaganda.” The operations commander further recommends in the report that “a photocopy machine, sufficient paper and ink” be brought to the Ixil-speaking village of Nebaj.<sup>45</sup>

The Army used psychological operations to try and turn the population away from the guerrillas, who by then had near total support in Quiché and other highland areas, according to contemporaneous Guatemalan Army reports.<sup>46</sup> The Army used doctrine and speech in villages as well as among displaced communities reorganized by the Army into so-called “strategic hamlets” or military-controlled camps. Testified one survivor:

One had to listen to speeches, that were always about the same things, what they wanted to put in our heads... You belong to communist organizations. But later, the real communists are going to kill all of you, their men are going to bring in people from other nations and they are going to be with your daughters, your women, your plots of land and everything else that you have...but now we are protecting you and now you are not going to accept anything from them, because if you go back to take anything from them, we will come again to kill you, your lives are in our hands.<sup>47</sup>

The Army further used discourse to recruit villagers to support or join paramilitary civil patrols. Nearly all civil patrol members were men. Most were also either ethnic Mayans or, to a lesser degree, *Ladinos*. Not unlike in Rwanda, military-induced fear operated on an intra-ethnic level, pitching ethnic Mayan civil patrol members against other Mayans. In highland areas, military-backed intimidation of civil patrol members often divided Mayans within the same language group or village. One civil patrol member told investigators for the Catholic Church report:

We did it out of fear. We cooperated because whoever didn't cooperate would be punished. And besides that, they dug a huge ditch,

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<sup>45</sup> An untitled, one-page report by Colonel Francisco Angel Castellanos G., Commander of the Area of Operation Sofía, to the Chief of Staff of the Army High Command, July 22, 1982; page 99 out of 359 pages of the classified documents set pertaining to “Operation Sofía” obtained by the National Security Archive ([http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB297/Operation\\_Sofia\\_lo.pdf](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB297/Operation_Sofia_lo.pdf)).

<sup>46</sup> See various “Operation Sofía” documents, ([http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB297/Operation\\_Sofia\\_lo.pdf](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB297/Operation_Sofia_lo.pdf)).

<sup>47</sup> La Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, párrafo 649.

there on the side of the road. We were afraid and had to do it, because where else [could we go]? And we were in their grasp, in their hands.<sup>48</sup>

But the military began by using doctrine and speech to indoctrinate their own officers. A former Army intelligence officer quoted in the Catholic Church report describes the training.

“We can’t allow ourselves to be conquered. Nothing to do with communism. Communism comes to take away lands and everything. It comes to exploit; it comes to do this and it comes to do that.” They brainwash you; they brainwash you good, to see how the movement is...So with a word they all become enemies of the people, of the whole country. And when you are in training, you say, “That’s true.”<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, the discourse was not deployed alone; the language was coupled with mechanisms to induce unwavering obedience by soldiers and paramilitaries alike. “Let’s say they told you to kill this person. You couldn’t say, ‘I won’t do it,’ because they had drilled into us that an order was to be obeyed without question,” testified an Army intelligence operative.<sup>50</sup>

Every military institution puts its soldiers through some ritual of incorporation or “boot camp” that bonds its members to the institution and to one another. But in genocides and other cases involving egregious violations or war crimes, the indoctrination may well involve extreme if not dehumanizing rituals. One Guatemalan military recruit described the grisly conclusion of one Army training course.

We completed three months that they said were for study. They arrived at a firing range and sent us to grab about three hundred dogs. We grabbed them and they shut us in together. “Okay, listen, this is the meat that we are going to eat today.” They took us to a firing range located below the university among the gullies, and they set us to kill those dogs. They filled a cauldron with blood, like a barrel. Each one of us had a disposable cup filled with blood and had to down it. Whoever didn’t drink it was two-faced. They gave us each a cup of dog blood. They didn’t serve us lunch that day in order to get us to eat that; our lunch was a coup of blood. During the meal, they gave us dog stew.<sup>51</sup>

The training rituals were accompanied by another level of indoctrination that prepared field officers and soldiers alike for their own roles in the carnage to come. One colloquial phrase, in particular, became a mantra within the Army by the time of the most widespread massacres. “The innocent must pay for the sins of the guilty,” is how a

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<sup>48</sup> Guatemala Never Again!, page 121.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 128 – 129.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, page 129.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, page 128.

former Guatemalan Army sergeant described it in an interview to this author.<sup>52</sup> A non-commissioned officer, the sergeant served as a liaison between commanding officers and mostly conscripted troops in the highlands of Quiché during the region's peak of massacres in 1982. He said he was taught the phrase by his superior officers who instructed him and others to impart it on down the chain of command.

Field officers regularly used similar language in speeches to civilians, sometimes while the Army was carrying out abuses in the same area. The discourse underscored the view that the victims were being justly punished for their sins. Noted the U.N. commission:

Sometimes the Army spent days in a community, carrying out the most devious acts. Afterward, they would wait for news [of the atrocities] to reach nearby communities to make the example "clear," reinforcing the point with speeches that tried to criminalize the victims, saying they were subjected to a just punishment and example corresponding to the "sins" committed.<sup>53</sup>

The same concept of just punishment was widely repeated by military personnel engaged in violence against civilians. Reported the U.N. commission:

During the massacres, the authorities also tried to inculcate the concept of "just" punishment in the population. Through discourses and speeches and by means of the selection of victims, they communicated the message that he who does not support the Army was a criminal worthy of the worst kind of death, without having the right to be properly buried. The criminalization and dehumanization of the victims was part of the operations. The practice of not burying the victims only added to the terror, especially since in many cases the corpses were left dumped and the people had to observe the animals eating them.<sup>54</sup>

Surviving villagers used the same kind of language in interviews with the Catholic Church. "The soldiers had begun to kill, without a word," said one. "They weren't asking whether anyone had sinned or not; they were killing that day."<sup>55</sup> Of course the notion of sin is a common reference in a nation as traditionally Catholic and still overwhelmingly as Christian as Guatemala. But the word also appears in the context of the disdain with which the military tended to hold the nation's indigenous population. Noted another survivor:

They really treated us with contempt. They would repeat their advice, the way you do with a baby. They still despise us; we have no dignity. They

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<sup>52</sup> Author interview, Sololá province, Guatemala, 1992.

<sup>53</sup> La Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, párrafo 794.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, párrafo 781.

<sup>55</sup> Guatemala: Nunca Más: I Impactos de la Violencia, Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala, página 11.

definitely despise the indigenous people there –all of the poor. Now we are below them, because we have sinned in their eyes, and they despise us. That’s how they are with us now.<sup>56</sup>

Finally, Guatemalan Army documents themselves underscore the importance of making survivors understand why they are being punished. One document written by an Army lieutenant indicates that people in the aforementioned Ixil-speaking village of Nebaj in Quiché department are so supportive of the guerrillas that, in order to turn them around, it may be necessary to use means on par with methods employed by totalitarian states. The lieutenant goes on to specify how propaganda and operations should work together.

Increase civic action throughout the area, as the struggle will not be won only militarily, but by tripling [the presence of] the Army and maintaining control over the area much like one might expect communist nations would do. And after having burned the homes and destroyed the quarters of the guerrillas or their collaborators, they must be spoken to and made to understand why they were victims of these attacks.<sup>57</sup>

IT WOULD be remiss to discuss the role of Guatemalan military discourse without also mentioning the role played by the United States in both deed and speech. In October 1982, as the massacres of highland Mayan villages were near their apogee, the U.S. administration led by President Ronald Reagan not only defended Guatemala’s military regime but accused its critics, including Amnesty International, of being part of a leftist conspiracy. “[A] concerted disinformation campaign is being waged in the U.S. against the Guatemalan government by groups supporting the communist insurgency,” reads one U.S. document later declassified by the Clinton administration. “[C]onscientious human rights and church groups,” the same Reagan administration report went on, “may not fully appreciate that they are being utilized.”<sup>58</sup>

Two months later President Reagan made a similar statement to reporters. After meeting with various Central American leaders in Honduras, President Reagan praised the Guatemalan President, Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt, as “a man of great personal integrity”

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<sup>56</sup> Guatemala Never Again!, p. 116. The Maryknoll English translation reads, “because we have done wrong in their eyes”; but the original quote in Spanish in the online version of the report (the editing and wording is slightly different between the online and print versions in Spanish of Nunca Más: II Mecanismos del Horror; the print version does not include this quote) uses the term *pecados* or sins to read, “*porque tenemos pecados ante ellos*,” as translated here. For the original quote, see the online version of volume II at: <http://www.odhag.org.gt/03publicns.htm>.

<sup>57</sup> A two-page report by Lieutenant Abner Isaac Monterroso Merida, Platoon Commander, Santa María Nebaj, July 30, 1982; pages 172 – 173 in the “Operation Sofía” document set ([http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB297/Operation\\_Sofia\\_lo.pdf](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB297/Operation_Sofia_lo.pdf)).

<sup>58</sup> “Analysis of Human Rights Reports on Guatemala by Amnesty International, WOLA/NISGUA, and Guatemala Human Rights Commission,” Department of State, Confidential cable, October 22, 1982, U.S. Policy in Guatemala: 1966 – 1996, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 11 (<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB11/docs/>).



who faces “a brutal challenge from guerrillas armed and supported by others outside Guatemala.” Later on Air Force One, when reporters pressed about Guatemala’s human rights record, President Reagan replied that Gen. Montt was getting “a bum rap.”<sup>59</sup> Gen. Montt was presiding at the time over literally the worst of the war’s abuses. *The New York Times* later established that the Reagan administration restored extensive covert ties with the Guatemalan military providing millions of dollars in CIA aid.<sup>60</sup>

Over a decade later President Bill Clinton went to Guatemala City and expressed regret for America’s role. “It is important that I state clearly that support for military forces or intelligence units which engaged in violent and widespread repression of the kind described in the report was wrong,” said President Clinton in March 1999, just two weeks after the U.N. commission report was released.<sup>61</sup>

The military at the time operated above the law. “Impunity permeated the country to such an extent that it took control of the very structure of the State, and became both a means and an end,” found the U.N. commission. “As a means, it sheltered and protected the repressive acts of the State, as well as those acts committed by individuals who shared similar objectives; whilst as an end, it was a consequence of the methods used to repress and eliminate political and social opponents.”

One unfortunate legacy of the nation’s long civil conflict is that widespread lawlessness remains common. Guatemala has one of the highest per capita murder rates in Latin America, and the perpetrators get away with it in all but two percent of cases.<sup>62</sup> But the nation is now more notorious for another trend. In recent years, Guatemala has surpassed even northern Mexico as the site of literally thousands of cases of raped and murdered young women and girls (many of whose corpses have also shown signs of torture). Possible suspected perpetrators range from street gangs to better-funded groups associated with what observers have dubbed “the hidden powers” or criminal groups suspected of being linked to retired military intelligence officers.<sup>63</sup>

At the same time, Guatemala has become second perhaps only to its much larger, northern neighbor of Mexico as a conduit for illegal drugs led by cocaine passing from the Andean region of South America to the United States. The most well-known drug trafficking suspects identified (by U.S. agencies during the administration led by President George W. Bush) to date are two former, U.S.-trained intelligence

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<sup>59</sup> “Reagan Praises Guatemalan Military Leader; Indicates He Will Support Resuming U.S. Arms Aid,” by Lou Cannon, *The Washington Post*, December 5, 1982.

<sup>60</sup> “Secret Guatemalan Military Unit, Linked to C.I.A., Dies and Is Born Again,” by Clifford Krauss and Tim Weiner, *The New York Times*, April 10, 1995.

<sup>61</sup> “Clinton: Support for Guatemala Was Wrong,” by Charles Babington, *The Washington Post*, March 11, 1999.

<sup>62</sup> About 6,300 people were murdered in Guatemala in 2008, giving the nation a per capita murder rate nine times greater than neighboring Mexico and nearly twice the hemisphere’s average; testimony by Mark Schneider, Vice President of the International Crisis Group, before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, June 9, 2009.

<sup>63</sup> *Hidden Powers: Illegal Armed Groups in Post-Conflict Guatemala and the Forces Behind Them*, by Susan C. Peacock and Adriana Beltrán, Washington Office on Latin America, December 4, 2006 ([http://www.wola.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=viewp&id=48&Itemid=2](http://www.wola.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=viewp&id=48&Itemid=2)).

commanders.<sup>64</sup> The same retired Army generals, Francisco Ortega Menaldo and Manuel Antonio Callejas y Callejas, are identified in U.S. military documents obtained by the private National Security Archive,<sup>65</sup> as well as by the Catholic Church historical memory report as being among the principal architects of military intelligence operations in the early 1980s resulting in wholesale massacres.<sup>66</sup>

The impunity that Guatemalan military officers enjoyed for their roles in politically-motivated acts in the past has since extended to protect them for their alleged roles in profit-motivated crimes today. “Intelligence indicates that large amounts of cocaine are being transshipped through Guatemala with almost complete impunity,” former Reagan administration official Otto Reich testified to congress in 2002 –the same year that the aforementioned intelligence chiefs were (at first quietly) identified as drug suspects by the Bush administration. “Few high-level figures are ever charged or even formally investigated for corruption, and fewer go to trial.”<sup>67</sup>

Retired security officials are suspected of being interwoven not only into the leadership of the nation’s organized crime, but also into the shadowy forces responsible for Guatemala’s many, ongoing human rights abuses. So much so that earlier in this decade Guatemalan civilian investigators formed a task force called the Commission for the Investigation of Illegal Groups and Clandestine Security Apparatus. The Bush administration approved the effort, and, once it stalled, the same administration –despite its often-stated criticism of international organizations— supported nothing less than a United Nations intervention to try and finally bring the nation’s suspected criminal leaders to justice.

The above task force was replaced by the U.N. International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala. The presence of a U.N. anti-crime task force with the power to investigate within the sovereign borders of a nation is rare elsewhere in the world apart from all but a few cases like a U.N. task force established in Lebanon to investigate the 2005 bombing of a former prime minister. The U.S. administration led by President Barack Obama is continuing to nominally support the U.N. International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, whose original two-year mandate was extended in 2009 for another two years.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> The administration led by President George W. Bush revoked the U.S. entry visas of both former intelligence commanders in 2002 over their suspected involvement in drug trafficking; see “The Untouchable Narco-State” (<http://www.texasobserver.org/article.php?aid=2071>).

<sup>65</sup> “Why the ‘Tanda’ Phenomenon Does Not Exist in the Guatemalan Military,” U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, Secret cable, August 27, 1991, posted under “The Guatemalan Military: What the U.S. Files Reveal, Volume II: The Documents,” by the National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 32 (<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB32/vol2.html>).

<sup>66</sup> *Guatemala Never Again!*, pp. 228 - 242.

<sup>67</sup> Statement of Ambassador Otto J. Reich, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemispheric Affairs, before the House International Relations Committee Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, October 10, 2002.

<sup>68</sup> See the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala’s website and description of its mandate (<http://cicig.org/index.php?page=mandate>).

Another legacy of Guatemala's long record of unchecked military violence is that elected civilian Presidents have remained woefully weak despite the nominal restoration of democracy in the mid-1980s. President Vinicio Cerezo set the tone at his inauguration in 1986 when he admitted to reporters that he had no power to bring past perpetrators of human rights to justice.<sup>69</sup> President Cerezo also admitted that he only enjoyed a share of the nation's real power in comparison to the Armed Forces.

Civilians elected President since have gained little if any more real power. Instead, the nation's various civilian institutions have continued to operate in the shadow of more powerful actors including retired military officers enjoying apparent impunity above the law.<sup>70</sup> At the same time, many Guatemalans in and out of government who have pressed for accountability against these so-called "hidden powers" have not survived.

The anthropologist Myrna Mack documented the existence of refugee communities living on the run from the Army within Guatemala before she was stabbed to death in 1990 near her office in Guatemala City.<sup>71</sup> The country's chief justice, Constitutional Court President Epaminondas González Dubón, had approved the first extradition of a Guatemalan military officer to the United States on drug trafficking charges shortly before he was gunned down in 1994 at close range in his car next to his surviving wife and child.<sup>72</sup> Guatemalan Bishop Juan Gerardi was bludgeoned to death in 1998 in his parish house just two days after he presided over the release of the Catholic Church *Nunca Más* report cited in this article.<sup>73</sup>

Convictions were eventually handed down for both the 1990 Mack and 1998 Gerardi murders, although other credible suspects implicated in both murders remain at large. Moreover, these two high-profile assassinations are among the only violent crimes prosecuted at all in Guatemala. The State Department recently reported:

Human rights and societal problems included the government's failure to investigate and punish unlawful killings committed by members of the security forces; widespread societal violence, including numerous killings; corruption and substantial inadequacies in the police and judicial sectors; police involvement in kidnappings; impunity for criminal activity; harsh and dangerous prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention; failure of the judicial system to ensure full and timely investigations and fair trials; failure to protect judicial sector officials, witnesses, and civil society representatives from intimidation; threats and intimidation against

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<sup>69</sup> See [The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads and U.S. Power](#), by Susanne Jonas, Westview Press, 1991 pp. 161 – 175; and [The Guatemalan Military Project](#), pp. 186 – 205.

<sup>70</sup> See the Washington Office on Latin America report [Hidden Powers](#) by Peacock and Beltrán.

<sup>71</sup> "Who Killed Guatemala's Leading Anthropologist?" by Frank Smyth, [The Village Voice](#), September 3, 1991.

<sup>72</sup> "Has Guatemala Become the Cali Cartel's Bodega?" by Frank Smyth, [The Wall Street Journal](#), March 10, 1995.

<sup>73</sup> See [The Art of Political Murder: Who Killed the Bishop](#), by Francisco Goldman, Grove Press, New York, 2007.

and killings of journalists and trade unionists; discrimination and violence against women; trafficking in persons; discrimination against indigenous communities; discrimination and violence against gay, lesbian, transvestite, and transgender persons; and ineffective enforcement of labor laws and child labor provisions.<sup>74</sup>

Human rights monitors --or their families-- are still attacked. In March 2009, the office of the Guatemalan Human Rights Ombudsman released a lengthy report based on recently discovered government archives documenting the role of the Guatemalan National Police in forcibly disappearing thousands of Guatemalans during the nation's long civil war.<sup>75</sup> The next morning the Ombudsman's wife, Gladys Monterroso, was forced into a car by three hooded men in front of a restaurant. The captors held her for 13 hours without demanding a ransom. They burned her with cigarettes, beat her and subjected her to sexual and psychological abuse, according to Human Rights First.<sup>76</sup> The Ombudsman is an agency of the Guatemalan congress that has the power to investigate but not prosecute alleged human rights violations.

MILITARY DOCTRINE and speech were instrumental in fomenting the bloodshed that continues to soak Guatemala's national fabric. Moreover the impunity that protected suspects who massively abused civilians back during the Cold War has extended to protect suspects as they traffic tons of illegal drugs today.<sup>77</sup> Establishing the rule of law in Guatemala will require, as a first step, acknowledging the past in a way that it cannot continue to be overlooked by leaders either in Guatemala or among the international community.

"Truth is the primary word, the serious and mature action that makes it possible for us to break the cycle of death and violence and to open ourselves to a future of hope and light for all," said Monseñor Gerardi upon the release of the Church's historical memory report at a press conference at the Metropolitan Cathedral in Guatemala City two days before his own murder. "It is a truth that challenges each one of us to recognize our

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<sup>74</sup> Guatemala, 2008 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, U.S. Department of State, February 25, 2009 (<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/wha/119161.htm>).

<sup>75</sup> "The Guatemalan Police Archives," by Kate Doyle, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 170, November 21, 2005 (<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB170/index.htm>).

<sup>76</sup> "Defender Alert: Demand Investigation into Kidnapping of Gladys Monterroso," Human Rights First, April 3, 2009 ([http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/defenders/hrd\\_guatemala/alert\\_040309\\_gladys.html](http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/defenders/hrd_guatemala/alert_040309_gladys.html)).

<sup>77</sup> In 2007 Guatemala extradited two Guatemalan nationals suspected of drug trafficking for the first time in over a decade since Chief Justice González Dubón's 1995 assassination; "Guatemala Extradites Drug Traffickers for the First Time in a Decade," DEA (U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration) News Release, New York, N.Y., March 28, 2007. The two extradited suspects were both, at most, mid-level heroin traffickers accused of smuggling heroin in the car batteries of vehicles driven one at a time into the United States. In 2008 Guatemala extradited a Colombian national wanted in the same case. Guatemalan nationals suspected of trafficking cocaine including one alleged kingpin have also faced either prosecution or extradition after being apprehended in other nations including the United States and Colombia. But Guatemala has not extradited any Guatemalan nationals suspected of cocaine trafficking since the mid-1990s before the chief justice's murder.

individual and collective responsibility and to commit ourselves to action so that those abominable acts never happen again.”