

STRUCTURAL REPRESSION & IMPOVERISHMENT IN CENTRAL AMERICA

COMMENTARY by Rights Action/ Derechos en Accion: The New York Times article, below, provides a sobering look at some serious, structural problems of repression and impoverishment in Guatemala and Central America. When reading the article, keep in mind that it ignores those global military and economic factors that contribute directly to the repression and poverty of the past and present in Central America.

Rights Action/Derechos en Accion funds a number of organizations and projects mentioned below, including the Plan de Sanchez mass grave exhumation and the construction of the Chapel that commemorates the names and lives of the Maya-Achi people massacred in Plan de Sanchez.

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"FIGHTERS' DEMANDS OPEN OLD WOUNDS IN CENTRAL AMERICA"
by DAVID GONZALEZ, New York Times, August 19, 2002

PLAN DE SINCHÉZ, Guatemala – The names of the dead are painted on the chapel wall, surrounded by grisly scenes of helicopters dropping bombs and soldiers killing women in a 1982 massacre of 184 people, who were tortured, shot and burned. The memorial, like those in cemeteries and chapels throughout this hilly region, demands jail for the killers and justice for the victims.

Down the steep and crooked mountain road that leads to the town of Rabinal, another list is being compiled. That one seeks a form of justice too, but not the kind grieving relatives expected. During the past two months, thousands of civil patrollers, the very men who helped wipe out villages at the height of Guatemala's civil war in the early 1980's, have submitted their names on lists to seek payment from the government for their deadly service. The patrollers say they, too, are victims, contending that they were forced under threat of death to leave their farms and villages to work with the army to rout leftist guerrillas.

Though many of the men were dragooned, many others also used the patrols to settle old feuds or steal land and cattle. They have re-emerged to make political demands, alarming many people in a country where the 36-year civil war ended with mostly unfulfilled promises for the victims, and with nothing for the patrollers except their demobilization.

Juan Manuel Jerónimo, who lost his wife and children in the massacre, said: "How can they pay those who were responsible for massacres, when the victims have not been taken into account? To do that would be mocking us." Central America was scorched in the cold-war years, caught up in a complicated array of civil wars, sometimes lasting decades, that finally ended in peace agreements and the hope that the

societies would finally heal. But in El Salvador, Nicaragua and particularly Guatemala, the foot soldiers of those wars are complaining that promises made or implied in the peace accords have never been fulfilled, and that they are mired in deep poverty.

The patrollers' demands are the starkest reminder that the peace accords across Central America have left a legacy of former combatants who feel abandoned to poverty. The social and economic problems that fueled the conflicts continue to fester, bedeviling governments with political battles they had hoped were over. Many of the former combatants see themselves as pawns of the cold war who were useful in holding the line against Communism and then cast aside when the wars ended as the world's attention turned elsewhere. The patrols, while demobilized, have not given up their old networks, or their demands, raising the fear that they could re-emerge to resolve their complaints in the way they know, with weapons and anger.

Accords were either too hasty, as in Nicaragua, or too ambitious, as in Guatemala. In either case, the inability to help the former combatants return to society with land and jobs is made all the more difficult by the inability of the region's governments to address widespread poverty or improve rural development. "The whole issue of reintegration is the greatest challenge in all postwar countries," said Manuel Orozco, Central America project director at Inter-American Dialogue, a policy analysis group in Washington. "It is greater when you are dealing with informal combatants like the patrollers or the contras. They did not have legitimacy in practical terms, and they did not enjoy the benefits of the peace process in Nicaragua, El Salvador or Guatemala."

Few people would say Guatemala has reaped the benefits of peace, after a conflict that claimed 200,000 victims. The agreements promised land, education and projects for the indigenous peasants, who accounted for most of the dead. The timetable set for even modest pilot projects in housing and other social services has been pushed back for years. Hordes of squatters regularly invade private farms in hopes of eking out a living. Human rights advocates who have brought genocide charges against the country's rulers continue to face death threats.

"The national program to compensate the victims has lost force," said Rosalina Tuyuc, who leads an association of war widows. "The majority of the widows have received nothing." Nevertheless, President Alfonso Portillo is considering paying \$2,600 apiece to former patrollers after 1,500 of them blocked roads near the Mayan ruins of Tikal. Although the accords abolished the patrols, the lawmakers of the ruling Guatemalan Republican Front have organized regional meetings with them. Most people believe that the proposed payments - to be financed by a tax on checking account transactions - are being promised by politicians hoping to win votes in the presidential election next year.

Rev. Gonzalo Villa, rector of the Rafael Landivar University, said the government's reorganizing of the patrollers was a violation of the peace accords. "Once they are organized to get money or benefits, they will continue to be used," Father Villa said. "It is very worrisome, but it is all part of the enormous steps back the government has taken." But Vice President Francisco Reyes was reported to have said they deserved payment for "a job performed." Victor Manuel Argueta Villalta, a retired general and the leader of a national veterans group, has also supported the patrollers, saying they have both been unfairly accused of war crimes. "We have all been demonized as human rights violators, that is what they attribute to those who defended Guatemala," he said. "We know they defended their communities."

The government has begun to cast the patrollers as victims and has said it will consider community projects instead of direct payments, making the benefits more difficult to be blocked by opponents. Diplomats, however, are enraged at the prospect of rewarding killers. "There can be no standard so lax that the patrollers are considered victims," said one Latin American diplomat.

But it is an argument that appeals to peasants who said they had to take part in patrols armed with nothing but sticks and machetes, and sometimes faced death for being suspected rebel sympathizers. "We only want help for our communities," said Fermin Alonzo, one of 1,000 former patrollers in Rabinal who have signed up for possible payment. "We were defenders. The government ordered us to do that, so they should cover our losses."

A similar group of patrol members in El Salvador failed to get even a promise from the government after the war, even though they staged sit-ins and formed a union. Foot soldiers fared slightly better, although they were often given land and modest housing in remote communities with barely fertile land. The former rebel leadership has since turned into politicians who, their former troops said, barely show any concern for their past comrades. "We haven't seen a single one of them up here since the war ended," said Marta Aguilar, a former guerrilla in the onetime rebel stronghold of Chalatenango. "It seems they just forgot about us once they got themselves into the government."

Politics is about all the former contras have encountered since they laid down their arms after Violeta Chamorro won the Nicaraguan presidency in the 1990 election against the Sandinistas. Contra commanders said about a third of their troops, which numbered more than 22,000, received land. Many others were given provisional titles, but they have yet to be given formal ownership, making it impossible to get loans or other assistance. Walter Calderón, a former contra leader, is organizing former contras to march on Managua and demand what was promised to them in a series of negotiations. He said many of

them felt abandoned by their foreign allies after they were generously financed in their proxy battles against Communism. "When there were other interests we were freedom fighters," he said. "When that no longer exists, we are nothing."

In the Río Blanco region, the peasants who made up a majority of the contra army now fight against being evicted by speculators and landowners. "We used to come here and be ambushed before," said Denis Antonio Molina Blandún, a former contra who is fighting the government's transfer of his cooperative's land to a private owner. "Now instead of weapons they use court cases, pens and paper."

The failure to provide the former combatants land and viable jobs reflects the greater inability of Central American governments to grapple with rural development. Farming had become especially difficult in the region because of drought, falling prices and earthquakes.

For many, there can never be enough payment for what they lost. Hermenegildo Jerónimo Sánchez's parents perished in the Plan de Sánchez massacre in Guatemala. Although he, too, was once forced to serve in the patrols, he refuses to ask the government for compensation, saying it would dishonor the dead. "If they give the patrollers money, there will be no peace," he said. "But there can be one way. If there is nothing for the victims, then they should have nothing, too. Then everything is even, like a plain. No one will be above the other."

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