

Reagan's Hand in Guatemala's Genocide

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By Robert Parry

Guatemala is taking steps to hold an ex-dictator accountable for genocide committed against Maya-Ixil Indians in the 1980s, even as the United States continues to honor the American president — Ronald Reagan — who helped make that genocide possible.

However, while Guatemala, though beset by many serious problems including widespread poverty, takes politically difficult steps to impose some accountability on these war criminals, the U.S. politician most associated with Ríos Montt and his genocide, remains the subject of endless adoration.

An Ardent Defender

In the 1970s and 1980s, as Latin American security forces were sharpening themselves into finely honed killing machines, Reagan was there as an ardent defender, making excuses for the atrocities, and sending money and equipment to make the forces even more lethal.

Genocide in Guatemala

After taking office in 1981, Reagan pushed to overturn an arms embargo that Carter had imposed on Guatemala for its wretched human rights record. Yet even as Reagan moved to loosen up the military aid ban, U.S. intelligence agencies were confirming new Guatemalan government massacres.

In April 1981, a secret CIA cable described a massacre at Cocob, near Nebaj in the Ixil Indian territory. On April 17, 1981, government troops attacked the area believed to support leftist guerrillas, the cable said.

According to a CIA source, “the social population appeared to fully support the guerrillas” and “the soldiers were forced to fire at anything that moved.” The CIA cable added that “the Guatemalan authorities admitted that ‘many civilians’ were killed in Cocob, many of whom undoubtedly were non-combatants.”

Despite the CIA account and other similar reports, Reagan permitted Guatemala's army to buy \$3.2 million in military trucks and jeeps in June 1981. To permit the sale, Reagan removed the vehicles from a list of military equipment that was covered by the human rights embargo.

Confident of Reagan's sympathies, the Guatemalan government continued its political repression without apology. According to a State Department cable on Oct. 5, 1981, Guatemalan leaders met with

Reagan's roving ambassador, retired Gen. Vernon Walters, and left no doubt about their plans. Guatemala's military leader, Gen. Fernando Romeo Lucas Garcia, "made clear that his government will continue as before – that the repression will continue."

Human rights groups saw the same grisly picture. The Inter-American Human Rights Commission released a report on Oct. 15, 1981, blaming the Guatemalan government for "thousands of illegal executions." [Washington Post, Oct. 16, 1981]

But the Reagan administration was set on whitewashing the ugly scene. A State Department "white paper," released in December 1981, blamed the violence on leftist "extremist groups" and their "terrorist methods," inspired and supported by Cuba's Fidel Castro.

More Massacres

Yet, even as these rationalizations were pitched to the American people, U.S. intelligence agencies in Guatemala continued to learn of government-sponsored massacres. One CIA report in February 1982 described an army sweep through the so-called Ixil Triangle in central El Quiche province.

"The commanding officers of the units involved have been instructed to destroy all towns and villages which are cooperating with the Guerrilla Army of the Poor [known as the EGP] and eliminate all sources of resistance," the report stated. "Since the operation began, several villages have been burned to the ground, and a large number of guerrillas and collaborators have been killed."

The CIA report explained the army's modus operandi: "When an army patrol meets resistance and takes fire from a town or village, it is assumed that the entire town is hostile and it is subsequently destroyed." When the army encountered an empty village, it was "assumed to have been supporting the EGP, and it is destroyed. There are hundreds, possibly thousands of refugees in the hills with no homes to return to. ...

"The well-documented belief by the army that the entire Ixil Indian population is pro-EGP has created a situation in which the army can be expected to give no quarter to combatants and non-combatants alike."

In March 1982, Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt seized power in a coup d'état. An avowed fundamentalist Christian, he immediately impressed Official Washington with his piety. Reagan hailed Ríos Montt as "a man of great personal integrity."

By July 1982, however, Ríos Montt had begun a new scorched-earth campaign called "rifles and beans." The slogan meant that pacified Indians would get "beans," while all others could expect to be

the target of army “rifles.” In October 1982, Ríos Montt secretly gave *carte blanche* to the feared “Archivos” intelligence unit to expand “death squad” operations, internal U.S. government cables revealed.

Defending Ríos Montt

Despite the widespread evidence of Guatemalan government atrocities cited in the internal U.S. government cables, political operatives for the Reagan administration sought to conceal the crimes. On Oct. 22, 1982, for instance, the U.S. Embassy claimed the Guatemalan government was the victim of a communist-inspired “disinformation campaign.”

Reagan personally took that position in December 1982 when he met with Ríos Montt and claimed that his regime was getting a “bum rap” on human rights.

On Jan. 7, 1983, Reagan lifted the ban on military aid to Guatemala, authorizing the sale of \$6 million in military hardware, including spare parts for UH-1H helicopters and A-37 aircraft used in counterinsurgency operations. State Department spokesman John Hughes said the sales were justified because political violence in the cities had “declined dramatically” and that rural conditions had improved, too.

In February 1983, however, a secret CIA cable noted a rise in “suspect right-wing violence” with kidnappings of students and teachers. Bodies of victims were appearing in ditches and gullies. CIA sources traced these political murders to Ríos Montt’s order to the “Archivos” the previous October to “apprehend, hold, interrogate and dispose of suspected guerrillas as they saw fit.”

Despite these ugly facts on the ground, the annual State Department human rights survey sugarcoated the facts for the American public and praised the supposedly improved human rights situation in Guatemala. “The overall conduct of the armed forces had improved by late in the year” 1982, the report stated.

A different picture – far closer to the secret information held by the U.S. government – was coming from independent human rights investigators. On March 17, 1983, Americas Watch representatives condemned the Guatemalan army for human rights atrocities against the Indian population.

New York attorney Stephen L. Kass cited proof that the government carried out “virtually indiscriminate murder of men, women and children of any farm regarded by the army as possibly supportive of guerrilla insurgents.”

‘Positive Changes’

Publicly, however, senior Reagan officials continued to put on a happy face. On June 12, 1983, special envoy Richard B. Stone praised “positive changes” in Ríos Montt’s government. But Ríos Montt’s vengeful Christian fundamentalism was hurtling out of control, even by Guatemalan standards. In August 1983, Gen. Oscar Mejia Victores seized power in another coup.

The report added that the “government of the United States, through various agencies including the CIA, provided direct and indirect support for some [of these] state operations.” The report concluded that the U.S. government also gave money and training to a Guatemalan military that committed “acts of genocide” against the Mayans.

“Believing that the ends justified everything, the military and the state security forces blindly pursued the anticommunist struggle, without respect for any legal principles or the most elemental ethical and religious values, and in this way, completely lost any semblance of human morals,” said the commission chairman, Christian Tomuschat, a German jurist.

During a visit to Central America, on March 10, 1999, President Bill Clinton apologized for the past U.S. support of right-wing regimes in Guatemala. “For the United States, it is important that I state clearly that support for military forces and intelligence units which engaged in violence and widespread repression was wrong, and the United States must not repeat that mistake,” Clinton said.

Though Clinton admitted that U.S. policy in Guatemala was “wrong” — and the new evidence of a U.S.-backed “genocide” might have been considered startling — the U.S. news media mostly treated the story as a one-day event. U.S. complicity in genocide prompted no panel discussions on the cable news shows, which then were obsessed with Clinton’s personal life.

<http://consortiumnews.com/2012/01/23/reagans-hand-in-guatemalas-genocide/>

[This version of Mr. Parry's article has been highly edited to remove descriptions of specific torture and assassination techniques, as well as condense the reading.]

[Many of the declassified Guatemalan documents have been posted on the Internet by the [National Security Archive](#).]

[For more on related topics, see Robert Parry's *Lost History, Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, now available in a three-book set for the discount price of only \$29. For details, [click here](#).]

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Ex-Guatemalan dictator
Efraín Ríos Montt

