Central America

The Tragedy Continues

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Still Spooked

Anyone who’s stopped by the CUSLAR office knows our dirtiest secret - we’re a bunch of pack rats. The problem is that every time we try to throw out an old poster demanding “No More U.S. Dollars for Death Squads” for example - it suddenly comes back into fashion.

As recent revelations have shown, U.S. support for murderers in Latin America didn’t end with the Cold War. And neither has the coverup.

Emmanuel Constant, responsible for the murder of hundreds of Haitians, has told The Nation magazine and 60 Minutes of the long support he enjoyed from the CIA throughout the exile of President Aristide. The New York Times has also reported that the U.S. Army grabbed tens of thousands of documents from the offices of the Haitian military and Constant’s death squad, known as the FRAPH. Now that it’s been caught red-handed, the Pentagon is reluctantly returning the documents, but only after it has screened them for embarrassing material. No Congressional investigations are scheduled.

As Nohemy Solórzano writes in this magazine, the CIA and the U.S. military illegally trained and supported Army-run death squads in Honduras. While a few embattled Honduran prosecutors endure harassment and death threats as they try to bring the guilty officers to justice, the CIA steadfastly refuses to release crucial files.

And, of course, Cornell Alumna Jennifer Harbury suffered through three hunger strikes before she learned that her husband had been tortured to death by a Guatemalan Army Colonel who was on the CIA payroll for over five years. It was also revealed that after the U.S. government officially cut off military aid to the Guatemalan Army to protest human rights abuses, the CIA sent down millions more to make up the difference.

After an internal investigation, the CIA issued a report on the scandal (classified, of course) blaming it all on a few “rogue agents.” Once again, they refuse to release any files relating to human rights abuses. Congress recently showed where it stood by passing a bill that would have banned all arms sales to Guatemala and denied visas and training to human rights abusers.

I guess that poster will have to stay up a while longer.

-Daniel Fireside
Army Massacre in Guatemala

An army patrol entered the returned refugee community of Xamal, Alta Verapaz province on the morning of October 5. When it left, 10 Mayan refugees were dead and 31 others lay bleeding on the ground. The events that sparked the bloodbath remain unclear, but the shots that tore into the refugees continue to echo throughout Guatemala.

According to the refugees, residents were preparing the first anniversary celebration of their return to Guatemala when soldiers suddenly entered the cooperative and demanded to be included in the celebration.

Refugee leaders informed the patrol that its presence in the community violated the 1992 accord prohibiting the army from entering returned refugee settlements. They asked the soldiers to turn over their arms and remain in the community until United Nations observers (MINUGUA) arrived.

The officer in charge of the patrol radioed back to his base. After a brief interchange on the radio, the young lieutenant ordered his men to fire into the unarmed crowd.

"One soldier shot into the air," said witness Emilio Caal, president of the neighboring village of Pozo Seco, "but his comrades, out of control, fired left and right, even wounding some of their own."

After shooting and hurling grenades at the refugees for several minutes, the soldiers began a slow retreat. As they withdrew, the patrol unsuccessfully attempted to destroy the telephone tower, the villagers' only form of communication to the outside world.

In all, the shooting lasted 45 minutes. Ten refugees died on the spot - including eight-year-old Santiago Coc Pop, shot in the hand, then finished off with a bullet to the head some 400 meters from the original killing site - and 31 suffered bullet and shrapnel wounds. Seventeen-year-old community educator Carlos Fernando Choc died of his wounds shortly afterward.

**Cold Blooded Murder**

A preliminary report released by the United Nations Observer Mission (MINUGUA) corroborates much of the refugees' statements. The report says the Xamal massacre "shows the consequences that can occur due to the autonomy enjoyed by the army in their counterinsurgency activities."

MINUGUA Director Leonardo Franco described the execution of Santiago Coc Pop as a "cold blooded" murder and said that attempts by the army to justify the killings as self-defense constitute an official cover-up of "unjustifiable and disproportionate" acts. The massacre underscores "the wicked influence of propaganda identifying refugees and returnees with the guerrillas," added Franco.

The soldiers, however, tell a different story. The troops were on a routine patrol close to the cooperative when they met some men who invited them into the community, but "we refused because we are forbidden from doing that," relates Lieutenant Alberto Chacán Lacán. Then, he says, the troop was surrounded by villagers who forced them to enter the community.

Inside the village an angry crowd of more than 300 insulated and threatened the soldiers. "They told us to throw down our arms because we were killers and for that they were going to strip us, tie us up and burn us," says the lieutenant.

At that point, Chacán claims, a group of women seized three of his soldiers' machine guns and began to shoot, wounding three of his men. "We shot in the air and tried to flee, but they shot at us from the houses," and the soldiers had to defend themselves, he continues.

The soldiers' version of events raises a number of questions. First, what was an army patrol doing passing so close to a returned refugee community, in clear violation of the October 1992 accord for the refugees' return?

Second, how did a group of unarmed refugees force the heavily armed patrol to enter the community? Third, how did unarmed women manage to seize weapons from the soldiers? Fourth, if the soldiers only fired in self-defense and, as they testified, used no grenades, how did so many of the victims receive shrapnel wounds and why did they kill an unarmed child far from the "ambush" site?

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US Dirty War in Central America Comes to Light

By Nohemy Solórzano

Two recent investigations tie the CIA and the U.S. military to human rights violations and covert activities in Central America during the 1980s. The first, conducted by the Baltimore Sun, has uncovered the CIA’s involvement in the training of a death squad that “disappeared” hundreds of Hondurans. The second, from the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, has tied the U.S. military to a massacre in El Salvador. These reports are just the latest revelations of illegal acts conducted by the CIA and the State Department in support of Central American death squads during the Reagan-Bush administrations.

Honduran Death Squad

The Baltimore Sun’s six-month investigation (published in a four-part series from June 11 through 18, 1990) concluded that the CIA and State Department trained and funded a deadly unit known as Battalion 316. The Battalion 316 tortured and disappeared alleged subversives, including hundreds of students, political activists, journalists and others who had expressed discontent with the Honduran government. Torture often involved beating prisoners and sending electric currents through their bodies. Women prisoners were frequently fondled and raped.

Battalion 316’s activities

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home and that they may be killed before they can testify.

Secret Mission in El Salvador

Another revelation appeared in a June 15, 1995, article in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer. According to this article, a group of 11 U.S. Rangers from Fort Lewis in Washington State were flown in 1985 for a secret mission to El Salvador, where their mission was to conduct a night attack on a guerrilla base. The Rangers killed 83 Salvadoran guerrillas, in retaliation for a previous guerrilla raid that had killed six Americans, including four military officers.

The Rangers did not know where their mission was or whom they were attacking. They were told not to wear uniforms or any other type of military identification. They were flown on a C-130 airplane from their base in Washington to an unidentified location, where they were met by three men, who accompanied them by helicopter to a primitive base in the jungle on July 31, 1985. The Rangers then killed 83 people in less than 12 minutes. Afterwards, the three unidentified men gathered documents and fingerprints, and the Rangers destroyed the guerrilla camp and its weapon and explosive supplies.

"The mission was, nobody was going to leave that camp alive," said one of the participating Rangers.

After this attack, then U.S. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger stated that the Salvadoran guerrillas responsible for killing the six Americans had received a major blow and the U.S. government had helped the Salvadoran army to take prisoners or kill those responsible. Since the recent revelations about the 1985 massacre, however, the U.S. government and the Pentagon have denied any direct involvement in Central American conflicts, stating only that they trained Salvadoran army officers.

The Post-Intelligencer article was based on the testimony of one of the Rangers and the confirmation of a "former special operations officer and former government official involved in establishing America's military counter-terrorist capabilities." The Ranger said he came forth because this mission was excluded from his military record.

Other servicemen have also begun to complain that their military service in Central America is being overlooked. A 60 Minutes report (May 21, 1995) stated that at least 5,000 U.S. military officers and personnel had participated in secret combat operations in El Salvador. These servicemen feel they are entitled to benefits traditionally awarded to other combatants, such as combat pay and promotions for combat experience.

Lessons?

Both investigations bolster the evidence of the Reagan and Bush administrations' involvement in Central American conflicts. During this time, the U.S. was supposedly promoting "democratic" processes in Central America through military involvement and financial aid. In fact, the CIA, the military and the State Department were participating in a dirty war. Millions of U.S. dollars funded torture and execution training and the direct participation of U.S. military officers in the Battalion 316 death squad in Honduras and the 1985 massacre in El Salvador.

The question of accountability remains. U.S. Senator Pat Leahy (D-VT) has called for the CIA and the State Department to release all of their files dealing with Central American secret missions and aid. So far, the State Department and CIA are refusing to comply, but pressure is building as more information about U.S. policies are revealed. To make a lasting contribution to justice, the U.S. must own up to its involvement in human rights violations and dirty wars in Central America.

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Winter 1995
Mexico Under Fire for Rights Abuses

By John Ross

When Amnesty International (AI) issued the results of its first-ever investigation into human rights violations in Mexico 10 years ago, the report cast an unwelcome spotlight on a badly-kept secret here.

The government of then-President Miguel de la Madrid dismissed AI's charges of abuse and impunity in the southern rural states of Oaxaca and Chiapas as exaggerated, politically skewered, and even an interference in Mexico's internal affairs.

The report Human Rights in Rural Mexico strained relations between the London-based human rights group and the Mexican government for years.

Now, a decade later, the mid-November publication of a new AI report has elicited a similar reaction from President Ernesto Zedillo.

In a carefully worded statement, Mexico's secretary of foreign relations charged that AI's report, Violations of Human Rights in Mexico - the Challenge for the '90s, "magnified" the dimensions of human rights abuse in Mexico.

The governor of the state of Guerrero - who comes under heavy fire in the report for his role in the June 28 massacre of 17 farmers in his state - said that the government "only recognized human rights groups that acted in good faith," and implied that Amnesty was serving "political ends."

President Zedillo has not commented on the Amnesty report. AI's deputy secretary general, Derek Evans, said that more than a year ago his group sent Zedillo 72 recommendations for improving Mexico's human rights record by the year 2000. The president has yet to respond.

AI is "greatly alarmed" by reports of escalating human rights abuses since the start of the year, Evans said. It has received information on 40 extra-judicial killings, four disappearances, 15 cases of torture, and more than 100 arbitrary arrests in the first eight months of 1995.

The growing abuse is most acute in Guerrero where more than a dozen members of the opposition Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) have been killed this year and a truckload of farmers, including members of the Campesino Organization of the Southern Sierra (OCSS), was ambushed by state police last June 28.

"The (OCSS) massacre could not have happened without the support of the maximum authority," the Amnesty report concluded in a clear reference to Gov. Rubén Figueroa.

On Nov. 7-8, Amnesty investigator Morris Tidball-Binz traveled to Tepetlixla, Guerrero, where most of 17 dead and 40 wounded farmers lived. Four days after the AI delegation left, the state judicial police took seven villagers into custody and reportedly beat and tortured them for 48 hours before releasing them without charges.

The victims claim they were interrogated about OCSS ties to armed groups in the Guerrero highlands. Tidball-Binz called the detentions and torture "retaliation" by Figueroa against the villagers for cooperating with the AI delegation.

The new AI report is the group's most severe critique of human rights abuses here to date. One focus of the report is continuing violations in Chiapas, including an investigation of the murders of as many as 16 homosexuals in the state capital of Tuxtla Gutierrez.

The new report also proves violations during the first weeks of the fighting in January 1994, following the rebellion of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), and the military offensive into the Zapatistas' Lacandon jungle base areas in February 1995. The report concludes that violations committed by the army remain unpunished.

Another target of Amnesty's concern is the continuing use of torture by police officials to extract confessions and the acceptance of such confessions by the judicial system.

One horror story included in the report describes the torturing of Ernesto Hernández and Félix Armando Fernández, arrested in Mexico City Oct. 20, 1994, and accused of membership in an urban guerrilla brigade.

Both were dragged across the...
floor by their testicles and nearly asphyxiated by plastic bags placed over their heads.

Another horror story involves Diego and Claudio Martínez, both deaf-mute Otomí Indians who were charged with murder based on confessions Mexico City police officers forced them to sign with their thumb prints after beating them and torturing them with electric shocks on their tongues.

Despite a judge's order on March 1994 that the two be released from prison, the brothers, who suffer mental retardation, were not set free until March 1995.

The new Amnesty report also critiques the use of military in civil law enforcement and cites evidence that army troops participated in the Feb. 8, 1995 detention and torture of accused Zapatistas in the states of Veracruz and Mexico.

Despite substantiation by the government's own National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) that confessions had been extracted by physical torture from the 19 young men and women seized in the raids, most remain imprisoned.

Tidball-Binz says his group is now weighing "prisoner of conscience" status for the accused Zapatistas.

The AI report considers human rights workers in Mexico are "at risk" from retaliation by those they denounce. The organization cites crusading Mexican Bishops Samuel Ruiz (San Cristóbal de las Casas) and Arturo Luna (Tehuantepec) as having been singled out for violent attacks in recent months.

Human rights activists say that despite their efforts little changes in Mexico.

"You've put your finger on the nub of the problem," Tidball-Binz said, "we issue these reports and they are filed and forgotten. Little changes..."*
Panamanians Debate Canal

By John Lindsay-Poland

Presidents Bill Clinton and Ernesto Pérez Balladares announced on September 6 that the United States and Panama will pursue talks to determine whether to keep U.S. military bases in Panama after 1999, when the Panama Canal Treaty call for their complete withdrawal. The first round of talks is scheduled to take place in January, and will determine whether to proceed to "formal negotiations." The Panamanian government said it expects to conclude formal negotiations for a base agreement and submit it to a plebiscite in Panama in late 1996.

However, the proposal has met with opposition in both countries, including leading figures in Panama's ruling Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) and the U.S. Army. PRD president Gerardo González, outgoing Assembly president Balbina Herrera, chair of the Assembly's Foreign Relations Committee Oyán Ortega all publicly oppose a new base agreement. So have former canal administrator Fernando Manfredo, Jr. and the Catholic Bishop of Colón, Mar. Jesús Ariz.

Canal Treaty negotiator Carlos López Guevara called prolonging the U.S. military presence an "insult" to the country. "We don't need the United States' crutches nor those of any other country to exploit our natural resources," he said, and stated that although there are 5,000 Panamanians who work on the U.S. bases, at the point of discussing a base extension what is involved is less than a thousand jobs.

Several prominent Panamanians launched the Panama Nationalist Forum in September, which calls for the canal to be administered by Panamanians for the benefit of the whole population, "without foreign military bases, so that the canal may be truly neutral." The Forum also seeks a constituent assembly to overcome political and social divisions within Panamanian society and produce a new constitution. Forum leader and constitutional lawyer Humberto Ricord said that negotiating a new base agreement is unconstitutional, and that participants in the talks could be sentenced to up to 20 years in jail for their actions.

Despite this opposition, the top Panamanian official for determining how to use the U.S. bases when they are transferred, former president Nicolás Ardito Barietta, suggested on October 15 that the United States keep two bases for ten years, as a "security incentive for foreign investors."

"Doesn't it seem as if we're in the Nineteenth Century," asks Charlotte Elton, director of the Panamanian Social Action and Research Center, "to use a foreign military to protect foreign investments? Whom or what from? The whole thing is a moving target. One minute we're talking money, next thing it turns out the reason why Panama wants the bases is to give security to foreign investors."

U.S. Reservations

The U.S. Army, concerned about costs for a continued presence, officially "non-concurred" with a proposal by Southern Command chief General Barry McCaffrey to keep up to 5,000 troops in Panama. But its resistance was squashed by higher officials in the Joint Chiefs of Staff, according to Rear Admiral (ret) Eugene Carroll of the non-governmental Center for Defense Information.

The move to keep bases after the Canal Treaty deadline could stall if it is complicated by popular opposition. A National Security Council official close to the process said, "We have a lot of other issues... and we can't let this take over." The administration practically invited resistance to the proposal by saying publicly, "If this thing gets too difficult to try to do, then it's dead, because people here are just not willing to expend a lot of political and financial capital on it." Panamanian Ambassador to the U.S. Ricardo Alberto Arias said that the talks with the U.S. could very well not result in a base agreement.

In the midst of these discussions, the Washington Post
published a front-page article about military bases in Panama, headlined, "Panama Turnabout: Yankee, Don't Go Home," which generated intense political indignation in Panama. Economy Minister Guillermo Chapman said the article made it seem as if Panama "is dying of hunger, which is absolutely false."

The talks will begin in Panama with a U.S. proposal for an approximate number of troops, places for housing them, the number of bases, their length of stay and the impact on Panama's economy, according to Foreign Minister Lewis Galindo. The United States has made it clear that it will not pay rent to Panama for use of the bases, prompting Galindo to say that rent is less important to Panama than the jobs the bases may provide.

The bases brought $260 million into Panama in 1993, according to U.S. Southern Command figures. Of this amount, $86.3 million was in wages, $84.5 million in local purchases, $21.2 million in construction and repair contracts, and $63 million in personal expenditures.

The U.S. negotiating team is lead by the State Department's deputy assistant secretary Michael Skol, who fought efforts last year to soften Washington's approach to Cuba during internal policy reviews. He was rebuked by the National Security Council for an unauthorized diatribe against Cuba during Congressional hearings, but remains in his post.

The Panamanian negotiating team is lead by Foreign Minister Galindo; Ambassador to the U.S. Arias; Augusto Zambrano, deputy director of the ARI, credited with a knowledge of the military properties; Gabriel Castro, director of the Technical Judicial Police, for his knowledge of the

"drug war"; Adolfo Ahumada, a legal advisor to the Foreign Ministry said to be an expert in the legal history of U.S.-Panama relations, and unnamed "presidential advisors." Zambrano, who visited the Far East with the president's delegation in September, announced on October 19 that the Filipino government favors a "certain" U.S. military presence in Panama after 1999, but that Panama should evaluate the question for itself.

Analysis

Panama has predicted hits economic growth strategy almost entirely on foreign investment and exports. The nation's economy, always shaped by its location at a global crossroads, became more dependent on foreign capital in the 1970s, during the reign of General Omar Torrijos. That period saw the rapid development of the international banking sector and the Colón Free Trade Zone, and populist projects financed by the international lending banks.

Today, Economy Minister Guillermo Chapman and other high ranking government officials speak repeatedly of the priority the government places on Panama's entrance into the World Trade Organization (formerly GATT) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The forced reform of Panama's Labor Code was carried out largely to attract foreign investment, on the premise that Panamanian capital is not sufficient to pull Panama out of its economic "sickness."

Similarly, the PRD's strategy for developing military base properties which transfer to Panama is based primarily on foreign investment. Thus, a high-level contingent of two dozen officials accompanied the president on his September visit to the United States, Japan, Philippines and Taiwan, where the first item on their stated agenda was grooming potential investors for the "reverted areas."

President Pérez Balladares has made 21 trips outside

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Panama in his first 13 months in office.

The continuation of U.S. military bases beyond 1999 fits neatly into this external economic policy. The U.S. Department of Defense is like a huge multinational corporation, which responds to interests outside Panama, and it is downsizing its operations—not only in Panama, but in the United States and around the world.

With the rise of the Republican Right in the U.S. Congress, however, the Department of Defense's "board of investors" has slowed its divestment in military bases. The 1995 domestic base closure list, originally expected to be the "mother of all base closures," was smaller than the closure list of 1993. One reason for this may be that the cost of cleaning up toxic contamination on the bases often outruns the immediate savings from closing the bases.

The U.S. military bases play a different role from other foreign companies in Panama, however, because of their history of using military force to intervene, not only in Panamanian affairs, but in the whole Central American, Caribbean and Andean region. This history has collided with Panamanian nationalist aspirations to control the canal and the population's security and economic destiny.

Pérez Balladares may be willing to negotiate for what he thinks the United States wants, in addition to the economic incentives common to all communities with dependency on military spending. His predecessor was sworn into office on a military base during the 1989 U.S. invasion, which killed hundreds of civilians, and the PRD was ousted from power by the action. Much depends, writes Jesuit priest Nestor Jaen, on "the expressed or latent interest of the United States on the bases. If this interest is great, then all the pressures will go in that direction and there will be grave danger that Panama gives in even on points where it should not. Unfortunately that is our history, and we don't escape its logic." Negotiations for a continued military presence will hardly be between equal partners.

Public opinion polls have consistently asked Panamanians whether they want the U.S. military bases to stay, and Panamanians in the majority have consistently said yes. U.S. leaders and President Pérez Balladares have cited these polls, asserting that policy must follow. Another poll showed that most Panamanians were against privatizing the phone company, after the government had sold half its shares to private investors, but President Pérez Balladares hasn't announced a reversal of the privatization. The polls are a product of Panamanians' lack of confidence in themselves as a people and in the psychological dependence on military money. A similar poll in any U.S. community facing a base closure would likely produce the same result.

When the question is posed differently, when Panamanians are asked how the U.S. bases should be used, most respond with a variety of social uses—housing to meet the country's acute shortage and universities, factories, ship repair facilities, and tourism. The Panamanian Center for Research and Social Action recently held a national art and writing competition for schoolchildren in Panama on how to use the U.S. bases. Of hundreds of responses, not one military use appeared in the paintings and essays.

Former Foreign Minister Raul Mulino notes that the economic result of a continued U.S. military presence would be "extremely reduced. That is what must be explained to the people," he says, "not the opposite shown in manipulated opinion polls, where people are asked whether or not they agree that such income should be lost by closing the bases."

Similarly, as U.S. citizens we ask ourselves why $600 million in tax dollars should be spent to keep troops and bases in Panama when Medicaid and many other social programs are being cut at home, not to mention the gutting of programs to clean up and convert domestic military bases for civilian use. A more sensible U.S. policy would focus less on protecting the Pentagon as an institution and more on grappling with the practical problems our peoples face.
Ballots and Bullets in Haiti

By Ed Kinane

Not all news out of Haiti is bad these days. Across the plaza from the Presidential Palace in Port-au-Prince, the Ministry of Women's Affairs occupies the former Army High Command headquarters. This startling conversion of swords into plowshares came soon after President Aristide virtually dismantled the Haitian military in late 1994. To the dismay of his U.S. handlers, only the Army's marching band remains.

In another promising initiative, the National Truth and Justice Commission deployed a 50-member task force this summer to record complaints on human rights abuses that occurred during the Cerdas regime, almost all at the hands of military and paramilitary thugs. By mid-September the Commission had collected the testimony of over 5,000 people and is now preparing a final report, expected at the end of December.

However, at this juncture — on the eve of the presidential election — these glad tidings seem comparatively symbolic. Offsetting them are other, more substantive, realities:

- Before the Cerdas regime was suppressed, it armed thousands of its supporters. They are still at large, many still having access to weapons and holding positions of influence throughout Haiti. It is widely believed that this latent Contra-like army is biding its time, waiting for international attention to wane. In any case, the lurking threat helps restrain popular mobilization.

- Although the Army was dismantled, 3,400 of its former members were recycled into the interim police, Haiti's only remaining national security force. In June, just in time for the national parliamentary and local elections, new police recruits — mostly U.S.-trained — began slowly replacing the discredited and ineffectual interim police. But the vacuum in civil security persists. Haiti continues to be occupied by UN forces which are mandated to remain at least through the inauguration of a new president in February 1996.

Haiti has the most feeble of judicial systems. Few citizens have been indicted, much less convicted, for Cerdas-era human rights abuse. The Truth Commission — which had to plead for a fax machine — didn't get a cut of any of the millions that USAID is throwing at Haiti these days. The commission was supposed to complete its work within 180 days of its March 28 founding, with virtually no money.

In its June 1995 report, Haiti's Human Rights Conditions Prior to the June 1995 Elections, Human Rights Watch/Americas provides this summary:

"The Haitian security situation significantly deteriorated during the month of March, when an UNMIH report documented ninety-seven murders, and specified that forty-five of those were killings of suspected criminals. In the months since March, there has been some improvement in the security situation, but serious concerns about political violence, crime, vigilante killings and the failure to disarm elements of the former military regime persist... The bands responsible for many of the murders, known as zanglendo, frequently use automatic weapons and two-way radios, suggesting a possible link to the former Haitian military or paramilitary forces, which monopolized weapons sales and possession for decades."

June 25 Elections

I spent two weeks in Haiti in late June 1995 as part of a 32-member election monitoring delegation sponsored by Voices for Haiti, Global Exchange, Witness for Peace and the Washington Office on Haiti.

Our several-person observer sub-team was stationed in the northern mountain village of Dondon, known as a "hotspot." Some independent candidates' names were left off the Dondon ballots (printed in California) and the local independent popular movement was riled. The candidates' supporters declared that no election would be held if their candidates' names weren't on the ballot.

At midday on June 24.

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Election eve, our sub-team watched as anti-election demonstrators sang, chanted, and made speeches. Scores of young demonstrators ran past us to the church hall, where materials were kept in preparation for election worker training. Some of the demonstrators entered the hall, seizing material that was then scattered in the mud outside.

Despite the many UN troops deployed in the town square, there was no election in Dondon the next day. Dondon was one of only a few communities throughout Haiti where the election was postponed. Although there had been a political murder in Dondon a few weeks earlier, during the several days we were there, we weren't aware of any bloodshed. However, there were some violent election incidents elsewhere in the country.

Pundits and ideologues debate whether Haiti's election was "free and fair." This is an important question, especially as June 25 can be seen as a kind of preview of the upcoming presidential election. Clearly, there were election snafus just about everywhere that day. This isn't surprising, given the complexity of the voting procedures (voters had to mark four separate ballots), an illiteracy rate at over 80 percent, scanty indigenous law enforcement, a farcical judiciary, and only rudimentary transport and communication infrastructure.

Although it was probably better to have the election sooner rather than later, electoral integrity was far from ideal: Haiti has yet to fully emerge from an era of terror. In the three years before Aristide's October 1994 return to Haiti, several thousand politically active and idealistic citizens were killed and tens of thousands driven into exile. Furthermore, the brutal thugs of the FRAPH, a paramilitary group supported by the CIA, now barely underground, undoubtedly helped put a chill on election campaigning and the open expression of grassroots partisanship.

Now is it easy to respect an election in a nation under foreign occupation, with massive election funding and intervention coming from outside. The $11.3 million that USAID openly channeled into the June 1995 election process made that agency a key player. USAID's long-term role in Haiti (and throughout Latin America) has been to foster U.S. capital—generally at the expense of the popular movement and grassroots democracy.

Voters Snub U.S. Choice

Many Haitians are aware of USAID's role. This was apparent in the Port-au-Prince mayoral race, the most important contest on June 25. The incumbent, the smooth and ambitious Evans Paul, had national stature. He was a strong supporter of presidential candidate Aristide in 1990. However the Aristide-Paul alliance didn't last, and Paul was touted as the U.S. choice to succeed Aristide.

But on June 25, Paul was drubbed. In a field of 20 candidates, the popular musician and activist Manno Charlemagne won the election with 45% of the vote to Paul's 18%. Charlemagne, who ran as an Independent, had never previously held public office. As Haiti's most famous folk singer, he used a guitar as his election logo. During his low-key campaign Charlemagne (who is quite close to Aristide) criticized the U.S.-led force that restored Aristide to power. He also questioned why USAID made direct contributions to Paul at City Hall instead of channeling aid through Aristide and the constitutional government.

The presidential ambitions of U.S. choice Evans Paul have now been derailed if not derailed. If the next president continues Aristide's policy of demobilizing the army, the U.S. won't be happy as the army has served the U.S. agenda since it was created during the first U.S. invasion of Haiti 80 years ago.

For the army's abolition to be enshrined in law, both the newly elected parliament due to begin in October and the parliament to be elected in 1999 must vote to amend the constitution. That's a cause both peace activists and Latin America solidarity activists can vigorously support.
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The answers to these questions will help determine if, as many fear, the massacre was a premeditated attack aimed at stopping further refugee returns and scuttling government and rebel peace negotiations which touched on themes that affect powerful economic interests in the country.

The Xaman massacre is the culmination of a recent series of attacks and harassment against displaced populations in northern Guatemala. The attack occurred only five days after an army helicopter strafed and shelled the outskirts of another returned refugee community, El Quetzal, in Petén province. As well, the commander of the Poptún military zone, also in the Petén recently accused returned refugees of Nueva Esperanza cooperative of being guerrillas and attacking a military garrison using weapons smuggled during their return from Mexico.

Meanwhile, residents of the Resistance Communities of the Petén (CPRPs) report increased army harassment with helicopter gunships flying low over their communities.

New Wounds Open Old Ones

Any massacre is horrifying, but the fact that the residents of Xaman (also known as the Aurora 8 de Octubre cooperative) fled to Mexico to escape similar slaughter more than a decade ago makes the latest killings particularly chilling.

Xaman resident Marta Brito Bernal, a young mother of three, says the massacre forces her to relive the horror she survived as a girl. "We were in Mexico because the soldiers forced us there. I was left an orphan. They killed my father, my mother, my brother, they killed everyone. They burned them. So I went to Mexico when I was small," she recalls between sobs, "but now once again, they are massacring us and this causes us great pain."

Ironically, the massacre occurred exactly one week after forensic teams began the exhumation of mass graves containing victims of earlier massacres near Xaman.

No More Silence

A significant difference between this massacre and those of the 1980s is the public reaction. When the army slaughtered tens of thousands of campesinos during their "scorched earth" campaign the media suppressed the news, a terrified population feared to speak of it, and the international community barely blinked an eyelid. Today, Guatemalans and foreigners alike have reacted with horror and vocal outrage.

The national press openly blames the army, thousands have marched and students have set up burning barricades in the streets to demand the demilitarization of their country, while the international community is putting intense pressure on the government to punish those responsible. The United Nations, the Human Rights Ombudsman, and the Catholic Church have all created commissions to discover the reasons for the massacre.

In 45 minutes of bloodshed 26 soldiers reduced to ashes the new international image President de León and the army high command spent millions to construct.

The barrage of criticism has forced the President to take measures unprecedented in other army atrocities. The soldiers involved in the massacre are already jailed, the commander of the military zone in Alta Verapaz has been fired and Defense Minister Mario Enríquez, accepting the army's institutional responsibility for the massacre, has resigned. In addition, the president named a "high level commission" headed by Attorney General Ramírez Cuestas to investigate the massacre.

Despite these swift actions, government response to the massacre is ambiguous. Both the army and President de León continue to defend the theory that the refugees brought the tragedy upon themselves by "provoking" the soldiers and Army spokesperson Colonel Guillermo Caal Dávila accuses "institutions linked to the URNG and those with personal interests" of manipulating information in favor of the refugees.

Meanwhile, government peace commission president Hector Rosada took advantage of the massacre to call for the imposition of martial law in "zones of conflict," and a moratorium on the refugees' return to their places of origin.

Refugee leaders are determined not to permit the "premeditated action" to impede the return to their homeland. Permanent Refugee Commissions (CCPP) representative Rubí Mejía said the refugee return will continue as planned and demanded the removal of military garrisons close to returned settlements.

Despite the trauma of reliving the nightmare that first forced them to flee Guatemala, the people of Xaman vow they will not be driven out again. "We are not going to return to Mexico. What has happened to us here only strengthens our determination to continue the struggle for development in our land," said cooperative spokesperson René Hernández Morales.
CUSLAR NEWSLETTER

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¡Soy Cubano!

To provide “one liter of milk each day” to all of its children was one of the goals of the Cuban Revolution. Unfortunately, in the last five years, Cuba’s dairy production has been cut by 20 percent, as farmers can no longer afford to import adequate feed for their cattle. Such economic problems can be traced to the tightening of the U.S. embargo and the collapse of the Soviet bloc, Cuba’s principal trader. Sadly, Cuba has had to end the milk rations for children after their seventh birthday.

Cuban researchers have been working on how to solve this problem and thus provide children between the ages of 7 and 14 with an adequate source of protein. The Food Research Institute in Havana has begun innovative ways of developing food products from soybeans, including a soy yogurt drink specially targeted for children in this age group. If large-scale soy production occurs, Cuban children between the ages of 7 and 14 will no longer suffer from cuts in milk rations.

The international company ¡Soy Cubano! has begun a campaign to raise funds to support the Food Research Institute’s creation of soy factories throughout Cuba. The Founding Partners of ¡Soy Cubano! sell “shares” in the company to tens of thousands of interested donors in the U.S., thus directly challenging the U.S. trade embargo of Cuba. As payment, the satisfaction of knowing they are helping to feed Cuban children and taking a stand against the U.S. embargo.

Shares are sold for $5 each and can be purchased in your name or in the name of someone else who loves Cuba - even Jesse Helms! For more information, please contact:

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