

As hope for reform sweeps the region, Guatemala remains a brutal backwater Resisting change in Central America

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Antigua on the Sunday following the air raid was conspicuously quieter than usual. Tourists stayed away not just because of what happened in Magdalena Milpas Altas but because the army and guerrillas had clashed again two days later, in Santa Maria de Jesus, a township only half-an-hour's bus ride from Antigua and less than 20 kilometres from Guatemala city.

Although not much discussed since President Vinicio Cerezo led his Christian Democrats into office in 1985, war in Guatemala drags dishearteningly on. The national armed forces, the real political power behind the civilian facade, claim that incidents such as the ones that occurred at Magdalena Milpas Altas and Santa Maria de Jesus involve only a small group of "terrorists" left over from the counterinsurgency campaigns of the late 1970s and early 1980s, when more than 400 Indian communities were destroyed, between 50,000 to 75,000 people "disappeared" or were killed, and as many as 200,000 rural families displaced from their homes and smallholdings.

Episcopal concerns were later reinforced by none other than the U.S. ambassador to Guatemala, Thomas F. Stroock. Addressing the Rotary Club of Guatemala, Stroock commented that he found it extraordinary that none of those guilty of kidnapping, torture, and assassination have yet been brought to justice.

FULL TEXT

OVER THE past few months, media coverage of Central America has revolved primarily around the election held on Feb. 25 in Nicaragua. Events related to this election, the results of which took many correspondents by surprise, carry profound implications for the Central American region as a whole.

The Sandinista defeat may mean not only the end of war in Nicaragua: It could allow Hondurans to live in peace more easily, without the disruptive presence among them of contra rebels and American servicemen.

Violeta Chamorro's victory at the polls may also reduce the flow of Nicaraguans crossing the border into Costa Rica, where more than 3,000 Nicaraguan refugees are reported to have entered in 1989 alone.

Guerrilla forces in El Salvador, long committed to negotiating a peaceful settlement to the conflict there, have reiterated their willingness to sit down and talk. The importance of renewing dialogue is certainly not lost on Salvadoran insurgents who anticipate that a change of government in Managua might not be beneficial to their cause.

One country, however, remains somewhat marginal to these developments and continues to be the Central American republic most North Americans hear or read about least: Guatemala.

The same day that Daniel Ortega presided over democratic voting in Nicaragua, four fighters belonging to the Quetzal Squadron of the Guatemalan Air Force bombed hilly locations in the township of Magdalena Milpas Altas, where the Organization of People in Arms (ORPA) had earlier engaged an army patrol in combat.

This encounter did not take place in some remote, mountain steadfast but in a small community near the colonial capital of Antigua, these days a "tourist town" where Sunday visitors normally fill the central plaza and keep Indian vendors and local merchants both busy and happy.

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If resistance is so slight, why (any foreign tourist would wonder) were government soldiers present in such visible numbers in February and March, not just in and around Antigua but throughout the central highlands?

The military's physical presence, in the countryside most of all, underscores the hold it exerts on virtually every aspect of Guatemalan life, from local affairs to issues of state. In a country that, next October or November, will hold elections in which no party left of centre is currently represented, the slogan painted on the army barracks at Sacapulas strikes a chilling, uncompromising chord. It reads: "Only he who fights has the right to win; only he who wins has the right to live."

Army graffiti as blunt and intimidating as this helps explain why Guatemala is again in trouble over human rights. Meeting in Quetzaltenango in January, Catholic bishops published a communique that expressed alarm over the recent political violence "that has struck at leaders, students, workers, and members of popular organizations." The bishops stated that "human rights, such as the right to dignity and equality, do not exist," pointing contextually to the injustice inherent in "the traditional structure of a minority that accumulates wealth and privilege while the impoverished majority lacks food, health, education, and reasonably- paid labor."

Episcopal concerns were later reinforced by none other than the U.S. ambassador to Guatemala, Thomas F. Stroock. Addressing the Rotary Club of Guatemala, Stroock commented that he found it extraordinary that none of those guilty of kidnapping, torture, and assassination have yet been brought to justice.

The ambassador's remarks were followed by the release of a damaging report not compiled by Amnesty International or Americas Watch but by the U.S. state department. In it, the U.S. (which has furnished President Cerezo's government with \$800 million in aid) acknowledged that a deteriorating human rights situation in 1989 had taken the lives of more than 2,000 Guatemalans. Their deaths were attributed, among other causes, to the activities of "ultra-right groups" and "military personnel" involved in "extrajudicial killing."

The report, which considers Guatemala to be among a handful of countries across the world "plagued by insurgency, civil unrest, and terrorism," was dismissed by President Cerezo as "false press information." President Cerezo's comment, in turn, prompted the release of another state department bulletin, which noted "the disturbing increase in what appears to be politically related violence."

There is no small, tragic irony in this crossfire of words, for the architects of American foreign policy in the 1990s have only their colleagues of 40 years ago to thank for cultivating a military caste that has brought so much grief to the people of Guatemala. High-ranking members of the national armed forces are a stubborn, repugnant breed who still see communism behind legitimate demands for a country as rich in resources as Guatemala to avail these resources more equitably.

When Chamorro assumes her presidency tomorrow, Sandinista respect for human rights in Nicaragua can serve to benefit other Central American people as well. Guatemalans, unfortunately, will not be among them, for their country continues to be bled by a vicious military even the administration of President Bush cannot tolerate in silence.

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Illustration

Caption: Photo (PAUL VAN ZANT FOR THE TORONTO STAR) soldiers guard Guatemalan military base; map Guatemala & Central America

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