

Peace declaration in Guatemala doesn't mean an end to the war

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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FULL TEXT

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How can a "new struggle" be avoided if the root causes of civil war are talked about, year after year, administration after administration, only to be addressed in theory, not in actual practice?

The "firm and lasting peace agreement" scheduled to be signed between government and guerrilla representatives in December, 1994, never materialized. Another round of peace talks was agreed to instead.

Talking about peace may be the closest Guatemala ever gets to it.

The gulf between rhetoric and reality is epitomized by Ramiro De Leon Carpio, the former human rights ombudsman now entering his third year as president.

In an interview published on May 5 in the news magazine Cronica, De Leon Carpio expressed his belief that, when

1995 ends, he will have passed on to his successor ``an entirely different scenario from the one I inherited when I took office."

A campaign mounted in the Guatemalan press by the president's own staff can be construed otherwise. Four well-intentioned announcements in several newspapers served equally well as a form of self-indictment. They run:

* ``Condemned to ignorance: Lack of education in our country impedes our social and economic development. Fifty-four per cent of our population are illiterate .

* ``Condemned to fear: Each day our country experiences a high number of assassinations, the result of common delinquency. Only one police officer exists for every 1,000 inhabitants.

* ``Condemned to isolation: The absence of roads and bridges marginalizes many of our communities, restricts their commercial and economic development. As much as 20 per cent of what small farmers produce is lost each year because of inadequate infrastructure.

* ``Condemned to death: A shortage of health services causes us to have one of the highest rates of infant mortality in Latin America. Only one in three Guatemalans has access to medical facilities."

All four announcements appear alongside related images - a tired teenager at work in the fields; a street urchin huddled anxiously on a bench; a young girl carrying corn in a basket on her head; a crying, malnourished child. And they all impart the same simplistic, remedial message: ``In order for the Value Added Tax you pay to be channeled into works that benefit everyone, ask for a receipt or a record of payment, because whoever defrauds Guatemala defrauds and condemns you."

Worthy though this initiative may be, far more deserving of government attention is non-payment of property taxes or failure to ensure that workers receive a legally established minimum daily wage.

Insisting that an intransigent elite assume some measure of fiscal and financial responsibility does not constitute an excessive demand, given the taboo status of land reform, but De Leon Carpio dodges these issues as resolutely as any of his predecessors.

If Guatemala's economic elite continues to evade the moral obligation to pay their taxes and disburse fair wages, a flicker of hope now exists that members of another powerful group - the military - may at last be brought to account for past crimes.

Revelations in March, 1995, that a senior officer in the Guatemalan armed forces, Col. Julio Roberto Alpirez, was involved in the June, 1990, murder of U.S. citizen Michael De Vine shocked senators and congressmen in Washington but caused little commotion in Guatemala.

American indignation grew when it was further revealed that Alpirez, a graduate of the U.S. Army's School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Ga., was on the payroll of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) at the time of De Vine's murder.

The CIA relieved Alpirez of his duties in July, 1992 - the colonel received a severance payment of \$44,000 - only after he was implicated in a second murder, that of the Guatemalan guerrilla leader Efraim Bamaca. Bamaca is alleged to have been tortured to death, if not at Alpirez's hands then under the colonel's direct supervision as

commanding officer of the army base in San Marcos. Bamaca was detained there following his capture in March, 1992.

Bamaca was married to Jennifer Harbury, an American lawyer whose pursuit of justice has brought to light multiple irregularities. One is that the CIA continued to finance army intelligence units in Guatemala even though president George Bush ordered a halt to all military assistance because of lack of co-operation in the investigation of the De Vine case.

Alpirez, who denies both charges of murder and any remunerative association with the CIA, was suspended from duty on April 27, 1995, along with fellow Col. Mario Garcia Caralan, also implicated in the De Vine affair. The American congressman responsible for exposing Alpirez's connections, Robert Torricelli, has called for the colonel's extradition and prosecution in a U.S. court. President De Leon Carpio's advice to Alpirez prior to his suspension was to sue Torricelli for defamation of character.

Whether or not Alpirez is eventually put on trial, it is clear that the courage found to lodge a case against him will also be drawn upon to press charges against other high-ranking members of the Guatemalan military, whose impunity has never been successfully challenged.

The Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo, a human rights association, intends to bring a suit against Alpirez because of his involvement in a series of abductions in 1984.

Another human rights group, the Asociacion de Familiares de Detenidos-Desaparecidos (FAMDEGUA), plans to charge army officers with responsibility for the 1982 massacre in the Peten district of La Libertad, where 13 sets of bones were exhumed from a village well last July.

The group's spokesperson Aura Elena Farfan claims the soldiers who took part in the massacre "were most astute, for after they killed some villagers, they stripped them of their clothes, and put them on."

The soldiers did this in a deliberate attempt to conceal their identity as they set about killing other village residents. "But they forgot to change their boots," Farfan observes, which gave them away.

The soldiers in question were stationed at the army base in Las Cruces, under the command of Capt. Carlos Carias.

Farfan, quoted in the Prensa Libre of May 6, 1995, adds with conviction: "We intend to keep going until we find our loved ones, even if all we find are their remains. We seek justice, not revenge. Without justice it is impossible to speak of peace and reconciliation."

Farfan's stance is supported by Archbishop Prospero Penados del Barrio, who has committed the Catholic church to a social project called the Recovery of Historical Memory, designed to put on record details of the atrocities that have resulted in the death or disappearance of an estimated 150,000 Guatemalans, many of them Maya Indians.

The church's project will benefit enormously from the work of the Equipo de Antropologia Forense de Guatemala, a forensic science team that in 1994 exhumed 84 bodies from a clandestine cemetery in what was once Plan de Sanchez, a small rural community near the town of Rabinal.

If the evidence from Plan de Sanchez is anything to judge by - Prensa Libre of April 30, 1995, carried a full-page account - eyewitness testimony is available to corroborate clinical findings.

George Lovell is a geography professor at Queen's University. His latest book, "A Beauty that Hurts: Life and Death in Guatemala," will be published this fall.

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Illustration

SYGMA PHOTO: ROPE-TIED HANDS BEHIND BACK.

DETAILS

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