

Still a long way to go for peace in Guatemala

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Mr. [Luis Barillas], an Achi Maya, hails from the predominantly Indian township of Rabinal, 50 kilometres north of the capital, Guatemala City. There, as in more than 100 municipalities throughout Guatemala, elections for the post of mayor were won by the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG), the party in office for the past four years. The FRG, headed by former military dictator General Efraín Ríos Montt, finished third in the presidential race with 19.31 per cent of the vote in the first round of balloting on Nov. 9, behind both UNE (National Unity for Hope), whose leader Alvaro Colom drew 26.36 per cent of the vote, and GANA (Grand National Alliance), whose leader Oscar Berger earned a majority 34.33 per cent of the vote.

Unfortunately, his actions only exacerbated the already hostile attitude of local FRG supporters toward him. In earlier revelations, Mr. Barillas had identified several of them, by name, as the perpetrators of crimes carried out in Rabinal at the height of Guatemala's brutal civil war in the early 1980s, when Gen. Ríos Montt was president.

His predicament deteriorated further on June 14. Arrangements had been made to bury the remains of 70 people recently exhumed from the grounds of an army base when Gen. Ríos Montt himself showed up in Rabinal to attend an FRG rally. Incensed that the general in charge of the army when their loved ones were abducted and murdered would use the very day of internment to visit Rabinal and make a campaign speech, the funeral procession filed toward Gen. Ríos Montt to confront him with the most damning evidence of all: the coffins of the dead. Violent altercations ensued before FRG handlers whisked Gen. Ríos Montt from the scene.

FULL TEXT

Luis Barillas, a Guatemalan journalist who arrived in Toronto on Oct. 30 to accept the 2003 International Press Freedom Award, won't be going back to cast a vote or to cover events when the second round of polling takes place tomorrow. Rather than return home with his prize and continue his work as a newspaper reporter and radio broadcaster, Mr. Barillas has decided to stay in Canada and seek political asylum.

Mr. Barillas, an Achi Maya, hails from the predominantly Indian township of Rabinal, 50 kilometres north of the capital, Guatemala City. There, as in more than 100 municipalities throughout Guatemala, elections for the post of mayor were won by the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG), the party in office for the past four years. The FRG, headed by former military dictator General Efraín Ríos Montt, finished third in the presidential race with 19.31 per cent of the vote in the first round of balloting on Nov. 9, behind both UNE (National Unity for Hope), whose leader Alvaro Colom drew 26.36 per cent of the vote, and GANA (Grand National Alliance), whose leader Oscar Berger earned a majority 34.33 per cent of the vote.

While Gen. Ríos Montt will not compete in the two-way presidential run-off tomorrow, his party is still a force to be reckoned with. In addition to its strong municipal showing in rural areas such as Rabinal, the FRG won 43 seats in congress, only five fewer than GANA and 10 more than UNE.

The FRG will relinquish the reins of central government on Jan. 14, 2004, but its power will prevail in places such

as Rabinal, where it distributed roofing material, seeds and fertilizers, and cash incentives in the weeks leading up to the Nov. 9 vote. As well as bribery and corruption, the FRG used harassment and intimidation to secure election outcomes in its favour. Mr. Barillas, in newspaper articles and on his radio program, disclosed these blatant irregularities.

Unfortunately, his actions only exacerbated the already hostile attitude of local FRG supporters toward him. In earlier revelations, Mr. Barillas had identified several of them, by name, as the perpetrators of crimes carried out in Rabinal at the height of Guatemala's brutal civil war in the early 1980s, when Gen. Rios Montt was president.

A UN Truth Commission has established that the army was responsible for acts of genocide against the Maya population of Rabinal and three other regions, where massacres were a military strategy, not random occurrences. An estimated 250,000 Guatemalans, 83 per cent of them Maya Indians, were killed in the 36 years before 1996, when a Peace Accord was signed.

Mr. Barillas maintains that, as commander-in-chief of the army when repression was most rampant, Gen. Rios Montt is ultimately responsible for the conduct of soldiers and militia in the field. All participants, but especially Gen. Rios Montt, should be held accountable and brought to trial. By bringing civil war atrocities to the attention of his readers and listeners, by calling for justice to be done, Mr. Barillas became a marked man.

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For the mourners who joined the demonstration, insult was added to injury when, in subsequent TV interviews, high-ranking FRG officials claimed that the coffins contained not human remains but sticks, rocks, metal objects, and other such makeshift weaponry, which they claimed had been concealed in the coffins in preparation for an attack. The FRG also alleged that Mr. Barillas, who was covering developments live "on air" for a Catholic radio station, was present not to report, but to foment anger and incite rebellion.

The inevitable threats came in the usual form of letters and telephone calls and culminated on July 4, when his house was bombed. Two days later, his sister received word that her children would be killed if her brother did not shut up. Mr. Barillas left Rabinal and hid out in the houses of friends and colleagues in Guatemala City until he obtained a visitor's permit and was able to travel to Toronto.

Seven years after the signing of a peace accord that was supposed to be "firm and lasting," true peace is no more a reality in Guatemala than true democracy. The provisions of the peace accord, aimed at addressing the gross social and economic inequalities that lie at the heart of the country's political woes, have not even been engaged, let alone implemented.

No matter which party or candidate wins the second ballot tomorrow, most Guatemalans will remain desperately poor, because neither GANA/Berger nor UNE/Colom will champion reform of the country's crippling structures of inequality. Furthermore, they will still have to contend with the FRG in congress and in day-to-day governance at the local level.

True democracy, as the experience of Luis Barillas sadly attests, is as much a casualty of what passes for democracy in Rabinal and elsewhere in Guatemala, as true peace.

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DETAILS

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