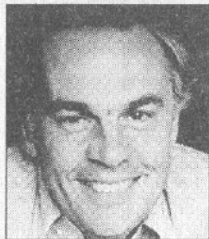


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Human Rights

A blind eye on Guatemala?

VIEW



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EIGHT YEARS AGO THIS WEEK, AFTER 200,000 unnecessary deaths, 40,000 'disappearances' and 440 decimated villages, peace formally came to the last redoubt of the Central American war zone, Guatemala.

Put it up there with Rwanda, Cambodia, ex-Yugoslavia and today the Congo, as one of the great killing fields of the 'post-war' world. The violence never reached the crescendo it did in neighbouring El Salvador, nor did as many people just 'disappear' as happened in Chile and Argentina, nor did the war stretch on and on as long as in Peru and Colombia, but no country in Latin America came near Guatemala in terms of long-term systematic assassination and torture.

Before my first trip to this heart-torn country in 1980 I went for a briefing in London from the secretary-general of Amnesty International. I had asked him to point me in the direction of the worst country on their books and Guatemala it was. "How many political prisoners do you have there?" I asked him. "None", he replied, "Only political killings."

On that first visit I broke the story in the *International Herald Tribune* and the *New York Times* that the death squads were not *ad hoc* groups of off-duty soldiers and private bodyguards of big landlords resisting peasant revolts, as was the common excuse, but were organised and directed from the presidential office. But there was an overpowering silence from official Washington where Ronald Regan was the new Teflon president.

The US ambassador to Guatemala, David Chaplin, regularly prompted his Washington superiors as to what was going on but it fell on deaf ears. In February 1984 only a day after he

had sent one of his revealing cables to Washington he was taken aback to hear that Elliot Abrams, the assistant secretary of state for human rights and one of the architects of Reagan's anti-communist crusade in Central America, had signed on a secret report to Congress in which he argued that human rights situation was improving in Guatemala and Congress should no longer be inhibited about the resumption of US security assistance.

A year later I took a three-day hike around Lake Atitlan, a massive, silver sheen of wide water lying beneath three extinct volcanoes, the heartland of the major guerrilla groups fighting on behalf of the overcrowded Indian communities. I learnt not just of the hardship of remote Mayan villages but of brave North American priests who lay down their lives in order to relay to the outside world the massacres and mayhem that happened in their parishes.

When George Bush Sr became president he moved to use his authority to wind down the killings. In 1999 President Bill Clinton, who had encouraged UN mediation that led to the 1996 peace accords, visited Guatemala and said, "For the United States it is important that I state clearly that [American] support for military forces and intelligence units which engaged in violence and widespread repression was wrong".

When a country has been through so much violence it is difficult for it to settle down and unlike El Salvador the Left is too divided and not politically strong enough to work with the government to give the country stability. Criminal violence is horrendous. The political violence ebbs and flows. Under President Alvaro Arzu who negotiated the peace accords, the official

death squads were dismantled. Human rights activists surfaced from the underground. But then under his successor, Alfonso Portillo, who is now wanted in both the US and Guatemala on charges of money laundering and embezzlement, the situation regressed. Last year the rhetoric once again changed for the better when Oscar Berger won office. He has cut the number of troops by half and installed a tough human rights campaigner as ombudsman. But still activists say they fear for their lives and big landlords with their private security forces are beginning to kill again.

I walked down from my hotel to the old presidential palace facing a plaza, once a quiet, somnolent place. A few years ago some president had ordered that the granite stone be painted over a vile green which quite suited its interior purpose. This time as I wandered around dodging the traffic and the bustling market place, marks of Guatemala's now thriving economy, I saw that the paint had been scraped off and the stone shone in the winter sunlight.

Guatemala is beginning to clean itself up inside as well as out. But it is a slow, slow process. The judges remain corrupt and the police ill-trained and incompetent.

Colin Powell's State Department has pushed on the human rights front but certainly could do more. Will Condoleezza Rice pay it as much attention? Left to itself, without continuous pressure from outside, Guatemala could easily slide back into its murderous old habits.

The writer is a leading columnist on international affairs, human rights and peace issues. He syndicates his columns with some 50 papers around the world