

Guatemala: The Mayan Genocide

Guatemala is a mainly mountainous country in Central America, just south of Mexico and less than half the size of the UK. It was once at the heart of the remarkable Mayan civilization, which flourished until the 10th century AD. When Spanish explorers conquered this region in the 16th century, the Mayans became slaves in their own ancient home. They are still the underprivileged majority of Guatemala's 12.3m population.

At the end of the 19th century Guatemala came under the rule of a dictator who put his country on the economic map by encouraging landowners to buy and run coffee plantations. The Roman Catholic Church was deprived of its lands for the purpose, and within 30 years Americans were the major investors. A powerful army and police force were set up to protect the wealthy landowners and their flourishing businesses. The Indians, with the status of peasants and laborers, saw nothing of the wealth being generated under a series of grasping dictators.

But in 1944 the current dictator was overthrown, and a new, enlightened government introduced reforms which put the interests of the native people first. Indians in both town and country were given consideration, social security, and education. Laborers could now set up workers' unions, and this gave them political strength as well.

However, attempts at land reform brought Guatemala's 'Ten Years of spring' to an end. When the Guatemalan government planned a program of compulsory purchase of land so that it would come under State ownership, the USA, its business interests threatened, set up a scare: 'hostile communists were at work'. America organized and trained a corps of eager Guatemalan exiles, then launched an invasion to bring down the government. In and after this blood-stained encounter - in which thousands died - workers' unions and political parties were suppressed, other reforms cancelled, and dissidents hunted down for assassination. Many appalled liberals fled into exile (including the young doctor 'Che' Guevara). A military dictator was helped to take over the government, followed by a string of right-wing military leaders dedicated to eliminating the left wing. In 1962 their policies resulted in a civil war that was to last over 35 years.

The oppressed people did their best. Despite the civil war, church leaders helped peasants to reclaim unwanted marshland, build co-operative villages and sustain both their traditional culture and new left-wing politics. Work was done to teach and maintain literacy and good health practices. A quiet, non-violent opposition movement for civil rights began to grow.

But so did armed resistance groups. **Guerrilla organizations were founded, adopting Marxist communist views to justify their use of violence**; they got some backing from Cuba. By 1981 three guerrilla groups had merged to create Guatemala's United Front, Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG). In that year, a small group of Mayan leaders marched to Guatemala City and occupied the Spanish Embassy, in nonviolent protest against government oppression of the native people. Though the Spanish ambassador urged the government to respond peacefully, his embassy was deliberately burned down, killing all the protesters together with all the Embassy staff (the ambassador survived).

The Guatemalan government, using the Guatemalan Army and its counter-insurgency force (whose members defined themselves as 'killing machines'), began a systematic campaign of repressions and suppression against the Mayan Indians, whom they claimed were working towards a communist coup.

Their 2-year series of atrocities is sometimes called 'The Silent Holocaust'.

In the words of the 1999 UN-sponsored report on the civil war: 'The Army's perception of Mayan communities as natural allies of the guerrillas contributed to increasing and aggravating the human rights violations perpetrated against them, demonstrating an aggressive racist component of extreme cruelty that led to extermination en masse of defenseless Mayan communities, including children, women and the elderly, through methods whose cruelty has outraged the moral conscience of the civilized world.'

Working methodically across the Mayan region, the army and its paramilitary teams, including 'civil patrols' of forcibly conscripted local men, attacked 626 villages. Each community was rounded up, or seized when gathered already for a celebration or a market day. The villagers, if they didn't escape to become hunted refugees, were then brutally murdered; others were forced to watch, and sometimes to take part. Buildings were vandalized and demolished, and a 'scorched earth' policy applied: the killers destroyed crops, slaughtered livestock, fouled water supplies, and violated sacred places and cultural symbols.

Children were often beaten against walls, or thrown alive into pits where the bodies of adults were later thrown; they were also tortured and raped. Victims of all ages often had their limbs amputated, or were impaled and left to die slowly. Others were doused in petrol and set alight, or disemboweled while still alive. Yet others were shot repeatedly, or tortured and shut up alone to die in pain. The wombs of pregnant women were cut open. Women were routinely raped while being tortured. Women - now widows - who lived could scarcely survive the trauma: 'the presence of sexual violence in the social memory of the communities has become a source of collective shame'.

Covert operations were also carried out by military units called Commandos, backed up by the army and military intelligence. They carried out planned executions and forced 'disappearances'. Death squads (some of which in time came under the army's umbrella), largely made up of criminals, murdered suspected 'subversives' or their allies; under dramatic names, such as 'The White Hand' or 'Eye for an Eye', they terrorized the country and contributed to the deliberate strategy of psychological warfare and intimidation.

URNG's guerrillas could not provide assistance to the Mayan Indians: there were too few of them. There were certainly too few to be a real threat to the State, whose massive and brutal campaign was largely driven by long-term racist prejudice against the Mayan majority. **Of the human rights violations recorded, the State and the Army were responsible for 93%, the guerrillas for 3%.**

Throughout the period of the genocide, the USA continued to provide military support to the Guatemalan government, mainly in the form of arms and equipment. The infamous guerrilla training school, the School of the Americas in Georgia USA, continued to train Guatemalan officers notorious for human rights abuses; the CIA worked with Guatemalan intelligence officers, some of whom were on the CIA payroll despite known human rights violations. **US involvement was understood to be strategic - or, put another way, indifferent to the fate of a bunch of Indians - in the wider context of the Cold War and anti-Communist action.**

In 1986 civilian rule and a new constitution were set up, but the army held on to its power, not least because half a million Guatemalans were members of army, police or civil defense forces, many of them responsible for the civil war's worst brutality.

Peace talks were set up by the UN in 1991, but made poor progress. Suspended in 1993, they were resumed in 1994 under a new democratic government led by the country's former human rights ombudsman. An accord on human rights protection was signed by the government and URNG. Other issues were discussed over the next year. A peace agreement was finally signed in 1996.

Since then Guatemala has been trying to recover from its civil war, hard to do when so many civilians had

taken part in atrocities and were now shielded by an amnesty law bitterly resented by victims. There were also many guerrillas and ex-soldiers to demobilize and resettle. All the same, a policy of reconciliation was introduced and, with difficulty, maintained.

Part of the peace agreement was the setting up of The Historical Clarification Commission (CEH), an investigation into the atrocities of the civil war. It began work in July 1997, funded by a number of countries (including the USA, a generous donor). The army was unable to provide its records for the period 1981-1983; but the three commissioners travelled through the country and collected 9,000 witness statements, protected by a UN confidentiality agreement. The Commission's mandate was limited - 'reflecting the strength of the Guatemalan armed forces in the peace negotiations', a commentator dryly observed: no names of human right violators could be given, and the Commission's work could have no 'judicial effects'.

The report, entitled 'Guatemala: Memory of Silence' was presented in February 1999. Its discoveries clearly revealed a governmental policy of genocide carried out against the Mayan Indians. Apart from being carried out by individuals, unnamed, the genocide was clearly also the responsibility of a hostile institutional structure.

The report had recommendations to make: the memory of the victims should be preserved, there should be compensation, and the democratic process should be strengthened. 'The CEH is convinced that construction of peace, founded on the knowledge of the past, demands that those affected by the armed confrontation and the violence connected with it are listened to and no longer considered solely as victims but as the protagonists of a future of national harmony.'

In April 1998 another report, the Catholic Church's 'Recuperation of Historical Memory' (also called 'Never Again'), had been published, which, like 'Memory of Silence' placed the responsibility for most of Guatemala's war crimes squarely on the army. The report was publicly presented by a noted human rights campaigner, Bishop Juan Gerardi; two days later he was murdered. In June 2001 a former head of military intelligence (a graduate of the School of the Americas) and two other officers were sentenced to 30 years in prison for the murder. Guatemala's chief prosecutor, who secured the conviction, then faced repeated death threats, and was forced to go into exile. He himself had taken up the case when the previous prosecutor, also threatened, had resigned and fled the country.

Also in June 2001, a legal action on behalf of 12 Mayan communities succeeded in bringing a charge of genocide against a former dictator who had seized power in 1982 (ousted by another in 1983).

In November 1998 three former members of a 'civil patrol' were tried in the first case arising from the genocide. These patrollers, with 42 others, had massacred 77 women and 107 children. The younger women were repeatedly raped and then killed. One 10-year-old Mayan boy, holding his baby brother, was accosted by a patroller, a man from a nearby town: 'I'm taking you back home to work for me. But the baby can't come, he's too small.' Then the man sliced the infant in two. The boy survived and lived to be one of the few eye-witnesses at the trial (some witnesses had been threatened with death in the previous months, by other ex-patrollers still getting protection from the Army). The patrollers claimed they were elsewhere, planting trees. They were found guilty and sentenced to death. But 'civil patrollers come low in the hierarchy,' says a journalist working in Central America, 'and perhaps their lives are expendable to protect the people who ordered the genocide.' Meanwhile the traumatized, impoverished survivors and the men who killed their families continue, somehow, to live in the same neighborhoods.

It is estimated that up to 200,000 people were killed between 1966 and 1990, including the many thousands who died or 'disappeared' in the genocide of Mayan Indians.

Witnesses

'I was 10 years old. The patrollers pushed me to the ground with some of the other children and we were told to stay there and keep our faces down. I tried to look up and saw my mother and sister in line with the other women. One by one they disappeared over the brow of a hill, and I could hear their screams. I could see my mother and sister approaching that brow. I was kicked and told to keep my head down. When I looked up again, over to the line of women, my mother and sister were no longer there. For two years a patroller kept me prisoner, but then I escaped.'

'The United States did not bear direct responsibility for any act of genocide, the Commission said. However, its government had known what was going on in the Guatemalan countryside. It had not raised any objections and had continued to support the Guatemalan army. In that sense, the United States was implicated. As for American businesses, the Guatemalan subsidiary of Coca-Cola had mercilessly pursued the trade union movement for years, and a dozen union leaders had been killed. The Commission said that the truth had been told in its report with the purpose of improving the condition of the peoples of Guatemala. Individuals and groups had the right to know who was responsible. While the Commission was not allowed to name perpetrators or attribute responsibility, the report indicates times and names institutions. People could deduce who was in charge. Everyone knew who had been President and Chief of Staff of the army in 1982 and 1983. If the perpetrators were brought to trial, it would be through the Ministry of Justice. People had every right to bring the accused to justice, the Commissioner stressed.'

http://www.ppu.org.uk/genocide/g_guatemala3.html

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