

1-13-2012

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Recommended Citation

Guatemala: Reconciliation or Retrenchment?, ALJAZEERA ENGLISH (January 13, 2012).

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Guatemala: Reconciliation or retrenchment?

Upholding human rights in Guatemala should be the US' first priority to avoid its past mistakes.

Last Modified: 13 Jan 2012 18:31



Guatemalan President Otto Perez Molina denies that the country's dirty war qualifies as genocide [EPA]

Springfield, Massachusetts - Fifteen years after ending its brutal internal conflict, Guatemala is beset by gang violence, drug trafficking, an intolerable crime rate and near complete impunity for the atrocities committed during the war. Retired army general Otto Perez Molina, elected on an "iron fist" platform by Guatemalans weary of unrelenting violence, will take office on January 14. Despite his victory, questions remain unanswered both about his past and about the methods he will use to suppress the country's **escalating disorder**.

The 1999 United Nations Truth Commission **report** condemned the US role in Guatemala's dirty war. Bill Clinton subsequently **expressed regret** for the US government's unconditional support for successive military regimes in Guatemala, which contributed to the brutal slaughter of more than 200,000 unarmed civilians, the vast majority of whom were indigenous Mayans. Clinton declared that US support for "forces or intelligence units which engaged in violent and widespread repression ... was wrong", and further vowed that "the United States must not repeat that mistake. We must, and we will, instead continue to support the peace and reconciliation process in Guatemala".

President Obama made a congratulatory call to Perez Molina. According to the White House, the men discussed "the shared responsibility for enhancing citizen security in Guatemala and underscored the importance of institutional reforms, respect for human rights, and inclusive economic growth in advancing the well-being of all Guatemalans". Given the sordid US history of meddling in Guatemala, the US must be vigilant in ensuring that these commitments are honoured.

In deciding how closely to embrace the new president of Guatemala, the US should be mindful of credible allegations that Perez Molina committed war crimes. Evidence demonstrates that Perez Molina was a military commander in the Ixil Triangle during the period in which the UN found that the army had committed genocide, and 70-90 per cent of the villages in that region were razed.

A particularly damning piece of evidence is a **videotape** of Allan Nairn interviewing General Tito, said to be Perez Molina's *nom de guerre*, in which he stands over the battered bodies of four insurgents. Perez Molina had ascended to the **head of the military intelligence** division when Efrain Bamaca Velasquez, husband of US lawyer Jennifer Harbury, disappeared in 1992. Harbury's tenacious and gutsy campaign for truth and justice later revealed that Bamaca was captured, detained and tortured by military intelligence for more than two years, after which he was extra-judicially assassinated.

Aside from the issue of personal culpability, Perez Molina strains credulity in his stated amnesia about the country's well-documented bloody history. Instead of signalling his intention to reconcile with the past, **Perez Molina denies** that genocide occurred and **conveniently ignores** the UN Truth Commission's finding that 93 per cent of the war crimes were committed by the army - and only four per cent were attributable to the insurgents. Perez Molina's unwillingness to confront the past bodes poorly for his conduct in the future.

Perez Molina has **vowed** to keep the courageous Attorney General Claudia Paz y Paz in office, where she can continue her heroic efforts to institutionalise the rule of law and bolster democratic institutions by bringing corrupt officials and war criminals to justice. Despite her incremental progress, **human rights advocates fear** that the attorney general will be summarily removed from office, or worse, fall victim to the Guatemalan military's notorious willingness to disappear those who pose a threat to corruption and impunity.

Advocates are further alarmed that efforts to hold the intellectual authors of Guatemala's war crimes accountable will be thwarted by the perfidious efforts of former military personal and their families to push through an amnesty for the perpetrators of atrocities, in contravention of international law.

The US stands at a dangerous precipice: It can demand an inviolable commitment to human rights as a precondition for continued assistance and diplomatic ties to Guatemala, or it can risk sliding back into unconscionable complicity in human rights abuses. Starting with the 1954 coup, the US has provided finances and military training to combat any perceived threat to US economic and geopolitical interests, in defiance of its stated commitment to advancing democratic ideals. Perez Molina himself was **trained** in brutal counter-insurgency tactics at the School of the Americas; Guatemalan civilians have paid an incalculable price.

The US is currently **providing aid** and intelligence to combat the drug war and gang violence that threatens to spill over onto US soil, with an unstated goal of maintaining a favourable investment climate for multinational corporations.

History has a nasty habit of repeating itself. Given the iron fist platform on which Perez Molina ran, the US must demand that human rights are not the first casualty of Guatemala's **imminent crackdown**.

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Source: Al Jazeera