

Guatemala – Article about Myrna Mack case

October 8, 2002

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COMMENTARY: As the Myrna Mack trial [discussed below] makes a tiny but important dent in the wall of impunity in Guatemala, it is noteworthy that no justice has been done, at all, for the direct and indirect role of the United States in Guatemala's 4 decades of repression and genocide, leaving more than 200,000 Guatemalans (a majority being indigenous) dead.

The US (with on-going and strengthened military and economic relations in Guatemala today) got away with impunity. Ending human rights violations in Guatemala is not a "national" challenge. The impunity of global actors, like the United States in this case, must be dealt with, or the violations will continue in Guatemala.

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A TALE OF TWO SISTERS

EDITOR'S NOTE: Behind the landmark conviction of a Guatemalan officer for ordering the murder of anthropologist Myrna Mack Chang is the valiant work of her sister Helen. PNS Editor Mary Jo McConahay watched the self-effacing office manager emerge to battle death threats and confront a paralyzed judiciary in her struggle for justice for her sister. McConahay (mcconahay@pacificnews.org) is a writer and filmmaker who lived in Guatemala for over a decade.

BY MARY JO MCCONAHAY, PACIFIC NEWS SERVICE

On Sept. 11, 1990, Myrna Mack Chang, anthropologist and mother, was killed by 27 knife blows to her slight body as she left a research institute in downtown Guatemala City. Since then I have watched Myrna's bespectacled sister Helen go after the murderers.

World supporters joined the cause, but in Guatemala the buck always stopped with Helen. I would see her slip away from friends at lunch to sit alone with her laptop, intent on learning the law. Overcoming shyness, she spoke into television cameras. Once Helen told me she

relied for strength on her religious faith -- she is a devout Catholic -- but she often looked ragged and pale, frequenting one bare hearing room after another as frightened judges procrastinated, resigned, or bounced the case around as if it were on fire.

"I asked Helen what country she thought she was living in," a colleague of Myrna's said, amazed, when he first told me that the self-effacing older sister was pursuing a police investigation. She was a middle-class business office manager uninvolved in politics. The hit men of a brutal military still operated at will. When a police inspector filed a report that called Myrna's murder political, committed by a member of the presidential security department, he was assassinated in broad daylight. The message was clear: the case should go no further. But it did, because of Helen.

One witness was assassinated, another fled into exile. Peace accords ending the 36-year civil war in 1996 made little difference. This June, Helen and 10 others received faxed death threats calling them "enemies of the state." They would taste "the steel of bullets."

Since Sept. 3, however, when the trial began of Gen. Edgar Augusto Godoy Gaitan, Col. Juan Valencia Osorio and Col. Guillermo Oliva Carrera for plotting and ordering Myrna's murder, I have been able to go to my computer in San Francisco and pull up a photo of Helen in a large and somber Guatemala court, sitting across from the officers. "Face To Face At Last" reads the caption.

Myrna Mack's crime was using professional social research methods, interviewing subjects in the field, to document the harrowing lives of thousands of displaced families crowded into refugee camps, or hiding in mountains and reduced to eating grass, fleeing the army's scorched earth juggernaut. They were not guerrillas. Myrna gave them a human face. Two hundred thousand died in the war, most of them unarmed Maya Indians. The army did not want the truth out.

Selective assassination is effective in the short term. Like a rock thrown into a pond, its ripples disturb a wide circle. Months after Myrna's death, in the northern jungles, a Guatemalan archaeologist became nervous as I asked what I considered innocuous questions about the government's role in preserving ancient Maya ruins. Wordlessly, he pulled from his back pocket a frayed clipping about Myrna's murder. The gesture said, "Let's not talk about anything that might get me noticed."

Beyond politics, Myrna's murder was a crime against a family -- immigrants from China in her father's generation. One night in the early 1990s, the judge, police, lawyers, the accused knifeman and others gathered at the crime scene for a legally required "reconstruction of events." A new witness appeared, a neighborhood man who said he could no longer hold back what he had seen. Lawyers

grilled him about point of view and precise times, but Myrna's young daughter Lucrecia finally asked about her mother's end with an intensity that hushed all others, "What words did my mother say?"

Americans should know this is not a drama far away and unconnected to us. Myrna's murder was planned and executed by a military unit called the "Archivo," an intelligence-gathering and command center dedicated to political repression. The Archivo (it means "the file") is a direct descendant of the U.S. intelligence system set up in Guatemala when the CIA overthrew the country's democratically elected President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 and installed a military dictatorship.

The CIA never left. In a Cold War where dissenters and communists were considered terrorist threats, the CIA helped create a list of some 70,000 "suspects." Some were assassinated. In 1964, the U.S. Office of Public Safety provided money and technical support for an executive civil-military intelligence unit that became a death squad coordination center.

Two of the three officers in the Mack docket -- Godoy Gaitan and Oliva Carrera -- graduated from the U.S. School of the Americas in Ft. Benning, Ga. Another officer who trained there, Col. Julio Roberto Alpirez, once headed the Archivo and participated in the murders of Michael Devine, a U.S. innkeeper, and Efrain Bamaca, a captured combatant and husband of U.S. activist-lawyer Jennifer Harbury. In 1995, Rep. Robert Torricelli (D-N.J.)

revealed Alpirez had been a paid CIA operative at the time. Helen's work has forced testimony about the secret Archivo into the public arena.

On Oct. 3, the Internet pictures changed. Valencia Osorio: guilty, the first time in Guatemala a military leader has been found criminally culpable for murder carried out by underlings. The other two: acquitted for "insufficient evidence." It is a partial victory.

When I first met Helen people used to say she and Myrna looked alike. Myrna's smiling face graces posters, forever young. Helen's face has grown older.

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