

Dissecting NYT report about ‘Genocidal General’ Poised to Win (undemocratic) Elections in Guatemala

By Grahame Russell, September 10, 2011

BELOW

A New York Times article. While a useful article, in a number of ways, Rights Action intersperses it with some points, prepared by Grahame Russell, to clarify or correct.

ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Sadly, but predictably, there is no reference – none at all – to the extensive role that numerous US administrations, including covert US agencies, have played over generations directly funding, arming and politically supporting the Guatemalan military and oligarchy. It has been widely reported that the ‘Genocide General’ himself, Otto Perez Molina, was on the CIA payroll.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Grahame Russell, info@rightsaction.org

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DESPERATE GUATEMALANS EMBRACE AN ‘IRON FIST’

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/10/world/americas/10guatemala.html?pagewanted=2&_r=1&ref=todayspaper

September 9, 2011, By [DAMIEN CAVE](#)

COBÁN, Guatemala — They burned villages, killed children and, just a winding road away from here in 1982, the Guatemalan military also massacred hundreds of Mayan peasants, after torturing old men and raping young women.

But now, all across these highlands once ravaged by a 36-year civil war, the region’s bloodiest anti-Communist conflict, Guatemalans are demanding the unthinkable — a strong military, back in their communities.

[Rights Action: It was not an “anti-communist” conflict in Guatemala. It was a campaign of State repression and genocide against its own, majority Mayan, mainly unarmed population, to keep in place an unjust economic development model that, indeed, remains in place today.]

[Rights Action: There is a presumption in these open paragraphs that Guatemala is a real democratic country, wherein people (voters) are in a healthy position to make a free and informed decision, as opposed to being a country characterized by historic and on-going racism, exploitation and poverty, violence and repression, impunity for the powerful sectors and a fundamental lack of democracy.]

That is how desperate this country has become as gangs and [Mexican drug cartels](#) run fever-wild, [capturing territory](#) and corrupting institutions so that Guatemala will remain a safe haven for cocaine, guns, money laundering and new recruits.

[Rights Action: While it is true that there has been a serious and devastating growth in gangs and drug cartels, since the 1996 “peace accords”, these are not the underlying source or cause of the repression and violence, impunity and a fundamental lack of democracy and rule of law. The wealthy elites (oligarchy, to be more precise) and the military remain the underlying causes and sources – and indeed direct beneficiaries - of the repression and violence, impunity and a fundamental lack of democracy and rule of law. Furthermore, sectors of the oligarchy and military initiated and are directly involved with drug trafficking and other sectors of organized crime.]

“It’s even scarier now than during the war,” said Josefina Molina, 52, making tamales a few steps from where a neighbor was killed two days earlier. “The danger used to be in the mountains — now it’s everywhere.”

Guatemala’s presidential election on Sunday could represent a turning point. The three top contenders have all called for a stronger, crime-fighting military, borrowing heavily from the Mexican model of attacking the drug cartels head-on, even though that strategy has claimed more than 40,000 lives without yielding peace.

[Rights Action: There is really no hope that these elections will represent a turning point. This is a mis-representation of the fundamental lack of real democracy in Guatemala, wherein the powerful sectors – oligarchy, military, police, organized crime – all commit crimes and human rights violations with close to complete impunity, while the majority population live in endemic conditions of exploitation and poverty.]

The front-runner is considered to be Otto Pérez Molina, a former general whose campaign symbol is an iron fist. Reserved and intellectual, he both commanded troops during the worst atrocities of the war and negotiated the 1996 peace accords that ended it. “He knows the strategies for fighting,” said Fábio Dagoberto Miza, a campaign leader.

[It is shocking but not surprising that the journalist, Mr Cave, made no reference here to the very serious allegations against General Otto Perez Molina, that he is one of the intellectual and material authors of the genocide, as well as disappearances and torture. Before Mr Cave's trip to Guatemala, he was in communication with Annie Bird and Grahame Russell of Rights Action, and I sent him the Allegation Letter recently submitted formally to the United Nations, alleging Perez Molina's participation in genocide, torture and disappearances, along with other background information. See: http://rightsaction.org/articles/Letter_to_United_Nations_082411.html]

But the question playing on repeat is whether the next government will get tough without violating human rights. "For many, there is a sense that the military is going to put things in order," said Raquel Zelaya, executive director of Así Es, a research group. And yet, she and others added, what if that faith is misplaced? "The notion that the military is the 'deus ex machina' that's going to resolve everything" does not recognize that the military "may also be part of the problem," said Cynthia Arnson, an expert at Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

Here in Cobán, a coffee town in the country's lush, mountainous middle, the concern can be heard, but mainly among older indigenous leaders who still shudder at armed Guatemalans in fatigues. It is harder to find on the streets, where there is a rise in murders, or among those, like Mrs. Molina's children — Cindy, Ericka and Enrique — who have no personal experience with the civil war.

As frustrated 20-somethings, they now represent the majority of the electorate. More than 60 percent of Guatemala's roughly 7.3 million registered voters are between 18 and 30 years old.

In their eyes, the war that killed an estimated 200,000 Guatemalan civilians is a vague shadow. The old ideological fight over whether leftist insurgents — angered by an American-backed coup in 1954 — would lead the country to Communism means nothing to them.

[See comment above. This is again a manipulative reference to "communism". The issues of State repression and genocide, carried out by the Guatemalan State, strongly backed by the US government, had nothing to do with a struggle against so-called communism.]

The army itself is a different institution now, far smaller, often responsible for passing out government aid and considered less corrupt than the police or the courts.

[This is a harmfully mis-leading statement. While the army does hand out "aid" sometimes, as it did during the worst years of repression and genocide in the 1970s, 80s and early 90s, the army has not fundamentally changed – and still

carries out acts of brutal repression, with impunity, most often in service of the economic interests of the minority sectors of the oligarchy. This is how it works.]

“Older people think that with soldiers we’ll go back to the past, back to war,” said Cindy Molina, 29. But the military and Mr. Pérez Molina, she said, “have the knowledge we need.”

Some experts believe the former general, who is also championing programs to fight poverty, is benefiting from Guatemala’s failure to fully confront its past. The country’s poorly financed schools do not include lessons on the war. Mr. Pérez Molina’s role has never been fully investigated (he has denied links to massacres) and despite efforts to unearth both memories and victims, most young Guatemalans are unaware of their country’s history. Edgar Gutiérrez Girón, a former foreign minister, says that when he asks students about the war, “they think I’m talking about Iraq.”

Their experience — their war — is against criminals. And across classes and ages, the consensus is clear: Guatemala is losing. Towns near the Mexican border and on routes from the coasts, where Andean cocaine typically arrives, are now openly controlled by drug cartels.

Planes used to carry drugs are visible in the Petén, a northern border region where cartel lieutenants have bought huge properties they claim to use for cattle ranching, a business perfect for laundering money — which also explains, experts say, the sudden boom in high-rise apartment buildings across Guatemala City.

Drug money has also poisoned politics. Several senior members of the national police, including the chief and deputy chief, were purged in 2009 for their involvement in drug trafficking, while illicit financing is expected to make this year’s campaign the most expensive on record. It is expected to cost \$50 million to \$70 million for each of the three main presidential candidates, according to Acción Ciudadana, the Guatemalan chapter of Transparency International, which tracks political spending.

Per capita, despite backbreaking poverty, that makes Guatemala’s elections among the priciest in the world. “Private businesses, the ones that usually fund campaigns — they don’t have that kind of money,” said Manfredo Marroquín, Acción Ciudadana’s director. Drug money, he argued, flows to nearly every party and candidate, so whoever wins will owe a debt to the criminals: “It’s a perverse circle.”

Violence attributed to Mexican cartels, especially the Zetas, also keeps spreading: a decapitated head dumped in front of Congress last year; a massacre of 27 farm workers near the Mexican border in May, in which a severed arm was used to write a message in blood; and then the murder and dismemberment of the case’s prosecutor two months later.

The favored solutions can be as bad as the problem. Hot lines in Guatemala City now allow people to order up punishment from private enforcers, who kill extortionists after they pick up a final payment and then pin messages on the bodies explaining why the murder was justified.

There are obvious long-term solutions, proposed repeatedly by experts: police reform, a stronger justice system with judges appointed for life and a security tax on the rich, similar to what Colombia enacted a few years ago. Already, there has been some progress on the judicial front.

But patience is waning. Mr. Pérez Molina's main challenger, Manuel Baldizón, a wealthy businessman running as a populist, has vowed to apply the death penalty more often, possibly in public.

The main challenge for whoever wins may be building confidence in a state described by Guatemalans as a caricature, a failure, a shame or nonexistent. In Cobán, many residents said that any attempted solution from the government, including a stronger military, would either never happen, or be blunted by the rich or criminals.

Indeed, just steps away from Josefina Molina's home, at the funeral for her neighbor, distrust mingled with tears. Freddy Colonal de Osorio, 25, said that after finding his father dead last week, he no longer cared what the government did — as long as it did something. "They're always promising, promising, promising," he said. "They never follow through."

WHAT TO DO

Please join a Rights Action education-solidarity delegation to:

- Honduras & Guatemala, January 7-14, 2012. Information: [Annie Bird](mailto:annie@rightsaction.org), annie@rightsaction.org, 202-680-3002
- Guatemala, March 10-17, 2012. Information: [Grahame Russell](mailto:info@rightsaction.org), info@rightsaction.org, 860-352-2448

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