

Rights Action
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NEED FOR INTERNATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY FOR GENOCIDE IN GUATEMALA

"The cozy relationship between Ríos Montt and the Reagan administration needs to be dug up from the graveyards of history, much like the bodies that are still being dug up from mass graves in Guatemala." (Cyril Mychalejko)



(U.S. President Ronald Reagan met with General Ríos Montt after he came to power in 1982 via a military coup. Reagan said (December 4, 1982): "President Ríos Montt is a man of great personal integrity and commitment. ... I know he wants to improve the quality of life for all Guatemalans and to promote social justice." [<http://nacla.org/news/2012/3/23/central-america-between-past-and-present>] Ríos Montt attended the Pentagon operated military training program at the School of the Americas in 1951. In 1954, Ríos Montt participated in the U.S.-orchestrated military coup against the elected government of President Jacobo Arbenz, that ushered back into power the military and oligarchy that planned and carried out the State terrorism, massacres and genocide of the 1970s and 80s, and that still dominate Guatemala today.)

RÍOS MONTT AND THE NEED FOR INTERNATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY FOR WAR CRIMES IN GUATEMALA

12 February 2013, by Cyril Mychalejko

<http://www.towardfreedom.com/americas/3138-rios-montt-and-the-need-for-international-accountability-for-war-crimes-in-guatemala>

On December 4, 1982, former President Ronald Reagan spoke in Honduras after meeting with Efraín Ríos Montt, the evangelical Guatemalan General who seized power in a military coup a little over 8 months earlier.

"I know that President Ríos Montt is a man of great personal integrity and commitment," said Reagan. "I know he wants to improve the quality of life for all Guatemalans and to promote social justice. My administration will do all it can to support his progressive efforts."

Two days later the regime that Reagan said was getting a "bum rap" sent a contingent of Kaibiles, Guatemala's notorious special forces unit, to the department of Peten. There they entered the village of Dos Erres, where they tortured the men, raped the women, took hammers to the children, and in the end murdered as many as 250 people. Afterwards they burnt the village to the ground as part of Rios Montt's "scorched earth" campaign against the country's Mayan population.

Thirty years later Ríos Montt may finally face justice. On January 28, 2013 a Guatemalan judge ruled that the former head of state accused of responsibility for "1,771 deaths, 1,400 human rights violations and the displacement of 29,000 indigenous Guatemalans" would be tried for genocide in a domestic court. This precedent-setting decision was lauded internationally by human rights activists and NGOs.

"Until recently, the idea of a Guatemalan general being tried for these heinous crimes seemed utterly impossible," said José Miguel Vivanco, Americas director at Human Rights Watch. "The fact that a judge has ordered the trial of a former head of state is a remarkable development in a country where impunity for past atrocities has long been the norm."

The Association for Justice and Reconciliation and the Center for Human Rights Legal Action issued a joint statement on the day of the decision, also emphasizing the significance of the trial.

"This event represents the path walked by thousands of victims of genocide. It allows for the path of memory, truth and justice to continue, which offers a solid foundation for the construction of a more just country," the statement noted. "We are hopeful that this case will continue on its course according to law and that soon there will be a final judgment against those who ordered genocide in Guatemala."

However, in order for justice to overcome impunity in Guatemala there needs to be an international component.

The cozy relationship between Ríos Montt and the Reagan administration needs to be dug up from the graveyards of history, much like the bodies that are still being dug up from mass graves in Guatemala.

The US media should use this case as an opportunity to act like the forensic anthropologists in Guatemala to sort through Washington's skeletons when it comes to the history of foreign policy in Guatemala. This could be done very simply by sifting through declassified documents, old press articles, and other past reports to accurately retell the story of modern US-Guatemalan relations and Washington's role in aiding and abetting what the United Nations declared a genocide, a genocide in which over 200,000 mostly Mayan Guatemalans were killed and tens of thousands tortured, disappeared, raped and displaced.

While the recovery and discussion of national historical memory is central to creating lasting peace and justice in war-ravaged countries like Guatemala, US citizens must consider their own country's history of promoting systemic violence in Guatemala if there is to be an improvement in US foreign policy toward the country.

Meanwhile, former US officials like Elliott Abrams, Reagan's State Department point man for Latin American policy, should be called to testify as a witness at Ríos Montt's trial, much like he did for a case in Argentina in January 2012.

Abrams testified via video conference that the Reagan administration knew that Argentina's military regime were stealing babies from political prisoners and giving them to right-wing and military families. After finding out about such crimes, the Reagan administration then provided the military junta political cover by certifying its "improving" human rights record.

In the case of Guatemala, complicity in war crimes is not limited to the United States; there are other international actors with blood on their hands.

In December 2012 the Jubilee Debt Campaign released a report, *Generating Terror*, which made the case that the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) helped legitimize and subsidize Guatemala's genocidal regimes of the late 1970's and early 1980's. The report uses the Chixoy Dam project as a case study. The World Bank and IDB funded this dam project, the construction of which resulted in a series of massacres that resulted in over 400 deaths. Even after the documented massacres, these same international financial institutions provided additional funding to the same project seven years later.

Guatemala also turned to countries like Israel, Switzerland, France and Belgium during the civil war for aid, equipment and training.

There can be no peace in Guatemala without justice. In order for justice to prevail, the war crimes and impunity in the country need to be dealt with as an international issue, not just a local problem. While the Guatemalan government, again with the assistance of Washington, is re-militarizing the country, and corpses once more pile up, the need for accountability becomes more urgent—people's lives depend on it.

[Also see Dawn Paley's investigation for *Toward Freedom: Strategies of a New Cold War: US Marines and the Drug War in Guatemala*. Cyril Mychalejko is an editor at www.UpsideDownWorld.org, an online magazine covering politics and activism in Latin America.]

WHAT TO DO?

Since the early 1990s, Rights Action continues to fund and support:

- mass grave exhumations carried out by the FAFG exhumation team
- justice for the Rio Negro massacre, the Plan de Sanchez massacre, the Dos Erres massacre
- justice for the genocide cases
- reparations and justice for the Chixoy hydro-electric dam harms and massacres

TO MAKE TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS (in Canada and the U.S.) to support this work, make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

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CREDIT-CARD DONATIONS can be made (in Canada and U.S.):
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- **JOIN A DELEGATION:** Form your own group or join one of our delegation seminars to Guatemala and Honduras to learn first hand about community development, human rights and environmental struggles
- **BALANCED DAILY NEWS SOURCES:** www.democracynow.org / www.therealnews.com / www.upsidedownworld.org / www.dominionpaper.ca / www.rabble.ca / www.fsm.org /
- **GOOD READING:** Eduardo Galeano "Open Veins of Latin America" / Howard Zinn "A People's History of the United States" / James Loewen "Lies My Teacher Told Me" / Ronald Wright "Stolen Continents" / Naomi Klein "The Shock Doctrine" / Dr Seuss's "Horton Hears A Who" /

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