

Still exhuming victims of US-backed Guatemalan genocides and massacres, 39 years later

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/exhuming-victims-of-genocides-and-massacres-in-guatemala>

- Below: BBC news report and photos by James Rodriguez

1975-1985 mark the worst years of US-led “cold war” repression in Guatemala. The US-backed Guatemalan military and economic elites planned and carried out campaigns of massacres, disappearances and torture, and – in four regions - genocides against the mainly Mayan population of Guatemala. This entire campaign of killing and disappearing civilians was justified in the name of the war against communism in general, and specifically the fight against very small armed insurgency (the URNG) that had grown out of earlier decades of military repression against the Guatemala population.

Guatemala disappeared: Reuniting families with the remains of loved ones

May 23, 2021, BBC news

Text & photos by James Rodríguez (<http://www.mimundo.org/>)

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-57133013>



Gabriela Meléndez is one of the forensic experts working to identify the victims of Guatemala's armed conflict

Almost 25 years on from the signing of a peace agreement which put an end to Guatemala's bloody armed conflict, thousands of families have yet to find the remains of their missing relatives.

More than 200,000 people were killed during the 36-year civil war between the military and left-wing rebels which ended in 1996. Of these, an estimated 45,000 people were forcibly disappeared, their bodies buried in unmarked pits or dumped in mass graves.



Sites where human remains are found are marked with a blackboard

Over the years, the Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala (FAFG) has tried to locate and identify the remains of the victims of forced disappearances.

They collect DNA samples from family members, carry out exhumations and return the identified remains of victims to their relatives for a dignified burial.



Forensic anthropologists take DNA samples of people (here, Juliana Tum Sicá, 78) who are still searching for missing relatives

But as the Covid-19 pandemic struck, the FAFG was forced to suspend its field visits for almost a year. In February, the FAFG resumed its work in the Ixil Mayan communities of Nebaj, Cotzal

and Chajul. In 1982, some of the most brutal massacres of the armed conflict were carried out in this area under the orders of then-military ruler General Efraín Ríos Montt.

Ríos Montt was convicted of genocide and crimes against humanity in 2013 but his conviction was later overturned. He died in 2018 while a retrial was under way.

Even though Guatemala's Supreme Court of Justice ruled in 2018 that acts of genocide were carried out against the Ixil people, only a small number of low-ranking soldiers have been convicted of war crimes and Ríos Montt has not been convicted of genocide posthumously.

Meanwhile, for many in the communities ravaged by the conflict, the search for those forcibly disappeared decades ago continues.

In 1982, Juliana Tum Sicá's family hid in the mountains near Xexucap along with several other people in order to safeguard their lives from constant attacks by the Guatemalan army.

While hiding in the mountains, Juliana's daughter, Paula Ajanel Tum, became ill and, without access to food or medicines, died aged seven.

Her body was buried in a shallow clandestine grave. The family hopes to recover the girl's skeletal remains to provide a proper burial.

The executive director and founder of FAFG, Fredy Peccerelli, says that the passage of time and other obstacles, such as the pandemic, will not stop his group: "Families still deserve to have someone accompany their search to try to identify their loved ones."

The FAFG has been working for years to locate, exhume and identify the remains of missing people. In September 2014, members of their team exhumed human remains at a former military garrison in Cotzal. Through DNA testing they were able to identify them as those of Baltazar Gómez Toma.



Baltazar Gómez Toma was executed almost 40 years ago

Toma and several other Ixil Mayan men had been summoned to the garrison on 3 February 1982. They were accused of being guerrilla sympathisers and executed by firing squad. After the FAFG identified his remains, they handed them over to his family for a proper burial in February 2021, after they had carried out the necessary Covid-19 safety protocols.



Relatives and friends of Baltazar Gómez Toma were finally able to lay his remains to rest this year

"It is our responsibility to continue to provide the experience and scientific know-how to accompany their brave search. They are not alone," Fredy Peccerelli says of his team's work.

The FAFG also carried out forensic analyses on the remains of José María Gran Cirera, Domingo del Barrio Batz and Tomás Ramírez Caba.

The three men were killed by the Guatemalan Army in 1980 after being accused of aiding guerrilla forces that operated in the region. José María Gran Cirera, who was originally from Spain, was the Catholic priest in the village of Chajul at the time and was killed along with his sacristan, Domingo del Barrio Batz in June 1980.

Tomás Ramírez Caba, who also served as a sacristan in his parish, was killed at the entrance of Chajul's Catholic Church later that same year. All three have been decreed martyrs by Pope Francis.

Their bodies were originally laid to rest in a crypt inside Chajul's Catholic Church but have been reburied following a beatification ceremony.

FAFG founder Freddy Peccerelli says that not only are the scars left by the armed conflict in communities like Chajul, Nebej and Cotzal still very deep, they continue to have repercussions today.

Poverty, lack of access to land, corruption and a increasing economic polarisation all play a role in keeping rural communities destitute. "The conflict widened the gap in access to education and to opportunities for work and employment," he says.

"The people who benefited and profited from the conflict now occupy political positions," Mr Peccerelli says. He thinks that until Guatemalans come to terms with their past and there are opportunities for them to build a better future within Guatemala, many will continue to emigrate to the United States.

Meanwhile, FAFG forensic experts continue their work to reunite families like that of Francisco Toma to lay to rest the remains of their loved ones.



Thirty-nine years after Francisco Toma was abducted, his relatives were finally able to take his remains for burial

Soldiers in uniform abducted Francisco Toma from his home in February 1982. His family was never told where he had been taken or what had happened to him. His remains were among scores of bodies exhumed by the FAFG from a mass grave at the Xolosinay Military Garrison in 2014.

Through DNA testing the FAFG was able to identify the remains and hand them to his family for burial.

More information

Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala (FAFG): <https://fafg.org/home/>

Genocide Trial: US-backed General Efraim Rios Montt

At 6:45pm, May 10, 2013, general Efraim Rios Montt was found guilty of genocide and crimes against humanity. A courageous, precedent setting achievement, all the moreso as repression, impunity and racism continue today in Guatemala. To date, there have been no justice processes against US political or military officials for the direct role

of the US in Guatemala's genocides. In this archive, a small collection of articles and reports about this historic trial and verdict.

- Archives: <https://rightsaction.org/genocide-archives>

Other War Crimes Trials Archives

Separate from, but similar to the genocide trial against US-backed General Efraim Rios Montt, a number of other war crimes trials have been working their way through the Guatemala courts, confronting endemic racism and repression, impunity and corruption in Guatemala. In this archive, a small collection of articles and reports about this historic trial and verdict.

- Archives: <https://rightsaction.org/other-war-crimes-trials-archives>

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