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Guatemala: Words are not enough

The Guatemalan government's reaction to the recent recommendations of the country's Historical Clarification Commission is simply not good enough, said an Amnesty International delegation just back from the country.

"Building a true peace is far more than simply signing a few pieces of paper," Amnesty International said. "As a signatory to the Peace Accords which established the Commission, the government is compelled to fulfill the undertakings stemming from the Accords."

"The Commission's work has cost Guatemala and the international community time, money and effort. Its findings cannot now simply be shelved or filed away," Amnesty International added, calling on the international community to make sure the Guatemalan government responds adequately to them.

The government's reaction thus far to the Commission's findings and recommendations has been a one page paid advertisement published on 16 March in two Guatemalan newspapers, which only responded to around half of the suggestions put forward by the Commission and made few -- if any -- concrete commitments.

According to Amnesty International, the Commission made some particularly strong points, including the recognition that the Guatemalan

army perpetrated genocide against indigenous peoples as part of its counter-insurgency strategy.

“To ignore that finding is an insult both to all those who died and to those who survived. It is an affront to all those who want to see this tragedy finally laid to rest and a true and lasting peace in the country,” Amnesty International said expressing concern that the government’s reaction made no reference to several of the most important recommendations, such as:

- the establishment of a special commission to investigate and take appropriate measures concerning the conduct of military officials involved in the armed conflict;
- the establishment of a government exhumations program to assist in excavating hundreds of mass grave-sites in which tens of thousands of victims of the counter-insurgency campaign still lie unacknowledged;
- the creation of a commission to establish the fate of all those who ‘disappeared’ during the conflict, including numerous children -- some of which may have been illegally adopted;
- the payment of reparations to victims of human rights abuses and their families.

“It is imperative that the authorities make clear what they intend to do to ensure that there is follow-up to the report and its recommendations,” Amnesty International said.

The Commission recommended a Foundation for Peace and Concord to monitor implementation of its recommendations, but so far the government has rejected this suggestion without making a clear alternative proposal.

At the same time, Amnesty International is calling on the USA -- whose role in Guatemala’s “dirty war” has been acknowledged by the Commission and by the US government itself -- and on the countries which have contributed to the Guatemalan peace process to make it clear what they will do to ensure implementation of the Commission’s recommendations.

During a visit to Guatemala in March 1999 US President Clinton made an unprecedented apology for the major role played by his country in Guatemala's brutal conflict.

"Words are not enough," Amnesty International said. "It is essential that the international community stands by its commitment to help heal the wounds of the past and move on to a lasting peace built on truth and justice."

Background

Under the Peace Accords which finally ended Guatemala's long-term civil conflict in December 1996, the Guatemalan government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) agreed to the establishment of a Historical Truth Commission, to "investigate human rights violations and acts of violence which caused suffering to the Guatemalan people connected to the armed conflict."

The Commission was also specifically mandated to make recommendations aimed at supporting the peace process and national harmony, by preserving the memory of the victims, promoting a culture of mutual respect and human rights protection, and strengthening the democratic process. In a strong and thorough report issued on 25 February 1999, the Commission found the government responsible for 80% of the abuses studied, laying 3% of the massacres at the door of the URNG.

An Amnesty International delegation visited Guatemala between 14 and 29 March 1999. It held talks with local NGOs, government bodies and donor governments and agencies on a number of subjects, including their reactions to the Commission's findings and what they intend to do to ensure implementation of its recommendations.

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