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The Truth: A step toward ending Guatemala's agony?

The tragedy and horror that we have been documenting in Guatemala over more than three decades has been officially recognised, Amnesty International said today, commenting on the report of Guatemala's Historical Clarification Commission.

The organization called for Guatemalan institutions and the international community to formally signal their acceptance of the Commission's findings, and begin discussions immediately on how to implement its recommendations.

"The Commission's report is a step along the road to setting things right for Guatemalans, who must never again suffer such atrocities," Amnesty International stressed.

"We particularly welcome the fact that the overwhelming responsibility of the Guatemalan military and their civilian adjuncts for the crimes has been clearly signalled -- as has the role of the US Central Intelligence Agency in Guatemala's agony."

It is now essential that the Guatemalan government, all the institutions cited in the report and the international community study the recommendations of the Commission and begin to implement them as a matter of utmost priority.

"This is the debt owed to both the living and the dead in Guatemala," Amnesty International said.

The human rights organization also welcomed the Commission's acknowledgement that impunity and the denial of justice were a factor in the conflict and the suffering it engendered.

"Justice must now be done as an essential step toward genuine reconciliation," Amnesty International said, expressing support for the establishment of a commission to review the conduct of military officials during the internal conflict, against the international human rights standards and humanitarian law which should have governed their operations and behaviour.

"Appropriate administrative and legal measures must then be taken. Killers cannot be allowed to continue to serve in the armed forces with impunity."

Amnesty International strongly supported the Commission's proposals for the payment of reparations to the victims and for the creation of an exhumation program by the government.

"It is high time for the authorities to support and indeed initiate efforts to clarify the truth about the massacres which occurred during the civil conflict, rather than leaving this to private initiatives, often hindered by local officials and the military," the organization said.

Just in the last few weeks, members of the Association of the relatives of the detained-disappeared (FAMDEGUA) and of the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Team (EAFG) , who were investigating a mass clandestine grave site in the department of Huehuetenango, reported harassment by soldiers.

“That was an apparent attempt to intimidate them and to interfere with the exhumations they were attempting to carry out there,” Amnesty International said.

To the Commission’s recommendations, Amnesty International added its own, that the government reform the Law of National Conciliation, to include extrajudicial executions and unlawful killings amongst the crimes which cannot benefit from impunity in any circumstances.

While broadly welcoming the report and its recommendations, Amnesty International expressed disappointment at the signal sent by President Alvaro Arzú’s decision not to receive the report directly -- as had originally been planned for the presentation ceremony yesterday.

“The government must deal with the recommendations of the Commission at the highest level,” the organization said, calling for the establishment of mechanisms to ensure compliance with the Commission’s recommendations.

“It is essential to guarantee that the past does not repeat itself, and that Guatemalans enjoy a better future, where their human rights will be protected.”

Finally, Amnesty International issued a strong call for the donor countries that will meet with members of the Commission in New York on Monday, to come up with specific programs and timely funding proposals to help implement the Commission’s recommendations.

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