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Guatemala: Twenty years crying for justice

Twenty years on from General Efraín Ríos Montt's coup -- which marked the opening of one of the bloodiest periods in Guatemala's recent history -- the death and "disappearance" of over 200,000 people remain unaccounted for and the vast majority of those responsible have not answered for their crimes, Amnesty International said today.

"Guatemala may have 'disappeared' from the focus of international attention, but the tragedy of a country which has still not confronted the massive suffering and loss of life of its recent past continues," added the organization, which re-visited Guatemala again in February to discuss its human rights concerns with the government, including President Alfonso Portillo.

"Government officials that met our delegation promised progress on human rights issues," Amnesty International said, "but regrettably, reality shows that they are actually doing little to deliver on their promises. Meanwhile, many of those responsible for planning and carrying out gross human rights violations during the conflict still hold positions of power in today's Guatemala."

"Not only is the Guatemalan authorities' inaction perpetuating the agony of hundreds of thousands of people who are still being denied justice for the atrocities they and their loved ones suffered -- it is also creating a climate of impunity in which those responsible for past atrocities lash out with ever increasing virulence at those who are collecting evidence and mounting bids to bring them to justice," Amnesty International said.

The most recent examples of this include repeated threats against forensic scientists involved in efforts to exhume mass graves in which victims of the army's genocidal attacks were clandestinely buried, in order to collect evidence for possible prosecutions.

Other new abuses appear directed at crushing those who are seeking to improve the working conditions for the country's oppressed and poverty-stricken majority of Guatemalans.

This means confronting Guatemala's "Corporate Mafia State" -- the "unholy alliance" of certain national and international economic actors, who work alongside sectors of the police and military and common criminals to protect its traditional monopoly over the country's productive resources and to control newer illegal or "black" industries such as drugs and arms trafficking, money laundering, car theft rings, illegal adoptions, kidnapping for ransom and illegal use of protected state lands.

"The world cannot turn its back on the 200,000 victims of the Guatemalan conflict, nor on all those others who continue to have their rights ignored, abused and violated," Amnesty International said. "For all Guatemalans to enjoy a meaningful and lasting peace, the international community must redouble its efforts to press for implementation of the human rights elements of the Global Accord on Human Rights."

"This was a key plank of the Peace Accords, " Amnesty International said, "yet the eighth anniversary of its signing is also marked this month, on 29 March, with little yet done to implements the absolutely essential human rights measures set out there."

**** In an effort to refocus international attention on Guatemala's unresolved legacy of genocide and the new human rights violations arising from that past impunity, Amnesty International published on 28**

February a new report, *Guatemala's Lethal Legacy: Past Impunity and Renewed Human Rights Violations*, available on the web at <http://web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/recent/AMR340012002>

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