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Guatemala: Those who forget the past are condemned to relive it

The fact that the President of Guatemala, Álvaro Arzú, and the Minister of Defence, Héctor Barrios, have acknowledged the participation of state bodies in human rights violations is a positive step, Amnesty International said today.

However, the human rights organization reminded the Guatemalan authorities that such statements should be seen only as a very small step on the road towards a real process of peace and reconciliation in Guatemala.

The statements by the President and members of the army, which also sought the forgiveness of the Guatemalan people, were made in the context of the “Day of Forgiveness” called by the President for 29 December in commemoration of the second anniversary of the signing of the Peace Agreements in 1996.

“Amnesty International has always stressed that public official acknowledgement by the Guatemalan State of its responsibility for past abuses, as well as acknowledgement of the suffering and trauma suffered by the victims and their relatives, is an important step in restoring the dignity of the survivors,” said Tracy Ulltveit-Moe, the researcher responsible for Guatemala. “It is also a very significant step in honour of the memory of the victims.”

“But it is not enough to say ‘I’m sorry’,” Mrs Ulltveit-Moe stressed. “Under the Peace Agreements, the government committed itself to adopting measures beneficial to national peace and harmony. It also promised to ‘favour peace and national harmony, preserve the memory of the victims, promote a culture of respect for human rights and strengthen the democratic process’. Objectives that can only be achieved if the Guatemalan authorities fulfill their legal obligations at national and international level.”

Such obligations include carrying out appropriate judicial investigations, punishing those responsible and providing compensation for the victims. For example, in Amnesty International’s view, the Guatemalan Government should offer its support to the efforts which are being made to exhume victims from the clandestine cemeteries used by the army during the conflict.

In the department of Quiché alone, the centre for the ceremonies held on the Day of Forgiveness, the army completely wiped out 220 communities during the conflict.

However, Amnesty International believes that it is important to emphasize that President Arzú’s suggestion that all sectors of Guatemalan society should share equal responsibility for seeking forgiveness for what happened is a distortion of the facts and that it is absurd to think that people can be ordered by decree to put the past behind them. The human rights organization also criticized the terminology used by the army which implied that the abuses committed were only “excesses”.

“Given that without any doubt at all the majority of grave abuses committed during the civil war were carried out by official forces, the vast majority of Guatemalans have nothing to apologise for,” said Amnesty International. “They were the victims and they have every right to decide for themselves at what point they feel they can forgive those who, in accordance with a plan which was approved at the highest government levels, systematically violated their rights.”

“Those of us who have been following events in Guatemala for some time cannot help but think of the words of the philosopher Jorge Santayana who said that those who forget the past are condemned to relive it”, said Mrs Ulltveit-Moe.

“That is precisely what has happened in Guatemala where cyclical violence and state-sponsored human rights violations have occurred over and over again. That is why Amnesty International firmly believes that burying the past does not pave the way to a future of peace and reconciliation.”

Amnesty International also fears that accepting responsibility for committing abuses could be a ploy by government and military sectors to undermine the efforts of the Historical Clarification Commission, the results of which are due to be published on 31 January next year.

An earlier report, published in April 1998 by the Recuperation of the Historical Memory Project (REMHI) undertaken by the Catholic Church, established that the army was responsible for about 80% of the 55,000 cases of human rights violations documented by the project. Among those crimes were 440 large-scale killings of non-combatant indigenous peasants, the perpetrators of which have still not been identified or brought to justice.

“The erection of monuments like the one inaugurated yesterday near the National Palace is also an inadequate gesture of compensation for the crimes of the past,” reiterated Mrs Ulltveit-Moe. “The greatest homage to the victims and their relatives would be to clarify the truth as to who was responsible for the abuses committed and in what circumstances the victims died.”

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