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First anniversary of the CEH report --Mass murderers walk the streets of Guatemala

Mass murderers responsible for killing thousands of people are allowed to walk free in a Latin American country, Amnesty International said today. That country is Guatemala.

A year after the publication of the historic human rights report by Guatemala's Commission of Historical Clarification, Amnesty International has launched a renewed call for justice to be done, and for those responsible for the gross human rights violations in Guatemala, including genocide, be held accountable for their crimes -- whether in the country or elsewhere.

The CEH report was welcomed by Amnesty International when it was published on 25 February last year as "a step along the long road to justice for the victims of the past gross abuses". The human rights organization called on Guatemalan government, the institutions cited in the report and the international community to study the recommendations of the Commission and begin to implement them as a matter of utmost priority. This it said was the debt owed to both the living and the dead in Guatemala.

"Today, one year later and under a new government, that debt is still outstanding. To the shame of the authorities, the recommendations of the CEH in most areas have been largely ignored," said Tracy Ulltveit-Moe, researcher on Guatemala.

Genocide: The CEH found that the Guatemalan army had carried out genocide against Guatemala's indigenous peoples in four specific regions of the country, yet those responsible for ordering and executing this genocide continue to walk free, while the number of people convicted for their part in the slaughter can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

"The few cases that have come to court have faced endless delays and obstructions: victims, witnesses and judicial personnel involved in human rights prosecutions and exhumations of mass clandestine graves have been intimidated to de-rail even the few attempts to prosecute perpetrators in Guatemala," said Tracy Ulltveit-Moe.

"Widespread judicial corruption has also contributed to complete impunity for all but a handful of perpetrators, and even then it has been the army's coerced civilian adjuncts who have been made the scapegoats, while the military officials who commanded them to act alongside army troops to torch entire villages and massacre their inhabitants have remained untouched."

Exhumations program: The CEH called for the government to establish an official exhumations program, but the government has failed to do so.

"The government's response has been as silent as the mass clandestine graves that still hold their unnamed and unacknowledged victims," said Tracy Ulltveit-Moe.

Special commissions on "disappearances": the CEH's call for a special commission to investigate the fate of the "disappeared" in general and another to look especially into the fate of Guatemala's 'disappeared' children remains unanswered.

"People whose parents went missing while they were small children are banding together to try and discover their parents' fate. Parents whose children were seized and have 'disappeared' are involved in a similar heart-rending quest to find out if their children may have survived, if they were perhaps adopted. No one in a position of authority seems willing to help," said Tracy Ulltveit-Moe.

The same can be said of all other areas highlighted by the CEH report:

Special measures for indigenous peoples: Eighty three per cent of the victims during the worst years of the repression were indigenous and the CEH called for measures to be taken to show respect for Guatemala's indigenous peoples, and to ensure that racism -- a major contributory factor to the slaughter -- was eliminated. Few steps have been taken.

Commission to assess the conduct of the security forces: The CEH called for a commission to assess the conduct of security force officials members during the conflict against standards set by relevant international human rights instruments and humanitarian law. This has not happened either.

Rehabilitation programs: Women were 25% of the victims of extrajudicial executions and "disappearances", and mass rape was also a widespread phenomenon during the conflict. The CEH called for psycho-social rehabilitation, including community health care to help overcome the unresolved traumas suffered by these abused women and their communities. No such programs are known to have been initiated.

Reparation: The CEH called for measures to ensure that the victims were remembered and commemorated, and reparation provided for them and their families, but no comprehensive program of compensation for state-ordered abuses has been introduced.

"Thus far the picture is bleak," said Tracy Ulltveit-Moe. "But the quest for justice continues, both in Guatemalan courts and abroad."

Amnesty International reiterated its conviction that justice was a prerequisite for genuine reconciliation and for constructing the firm and lasting peace called for in the peace accords.

"Given the appalling failure of the Guatemalan government to ensure justice in its own courts, we reiterate our support for all efforts whether in the country itself or abroad, to make those responsible for mass murder answer for their crimes."

"The international community has spoken up loud and clear against impunity -- the Pinochet case is proof of that. It must now ensure that the Guatemalan government knows that its failure to deal adequately with the aftermath of the conflict which cost so many Guatemalan lives will also cost it the respect and support of the international community if it does not institute programs to seek redress, justice and compensation for all those who were the victims of State violence."

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For more information please call Soraya Bermejo, Press Officer, on +44 171 413 5562

Website: <http://www.amnesty.org>