

Seeking Justice for Guatemalan Slaughter

Brave prosecutors in Guatemala are trying to enforce accountability for government-sponsored rapes, tortures and murders in the 1980s, a time when President Reagan and his administration were complicit in the atrocities but remain respected U.S. figures, as Allan Nairn explained to Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Comedian-turned-politician Jimmy Morales, who was sworn in as Guatemala's president on Jan. 14, appears to have close ties to some of the country's most notorious death squad leaders responsible for killing thousands and uprooting tens of thousands of indigenous people from the Guatemalan highlands and the rest of the country in the 1980s.

Meanwhile, on Jan. 6, eight days before the Morales swearing in, Guatemalan police arrested some 18 former military officers for crimes committed during Guatemala's 36-year "death squad" war from 1960 to 1996 that is estimated to have killed a total of 200,000 people. Included in the sweeps were some of the key participants in the dirty war, including Manuel Benedicto Lucas Garcia, the brother of Guatemala's military dictator from 1978 – 1982, Fernando Romeo Lucas Garcia.

The dramatic arrests came as the retrial of another former head of state, Efraín Ríos Montt, is scheduled to begin in late January. However there have been repeated delays in the rehearing of the genocide case against Ríos Montt who was found guilty in 2013 but his conviction was overturned by Guatemala's Constitutional Court.

I spoke about issues with Allan Nairn, the George Polk Award-winning investigative reporter and human rights activist who has done extensive reporting on the Central American death squads and the U.S. support for them. Nairn was scheduled to testify at the first trial of Ríos Montt, but was prevented by the judge.

DB: Let's start with Ríos Montt and work our way forward, to the present. Ríos Montt and Rodríguez Sánchez, they were tried in 2013; Montt was convicted. What was he convicted of?

AN: Well, Ríos Montt was convicted of genocide, and he was sentenced to 80 years in prison. His intelligence chief, Rodríguez Sánchez, was acquitted in that preceding. Ríos Montt was placed under house arrest, and then immediately the oligarchs of Guatemala ... went on T.V. and they demanded that the Ríos Montt conviction be annulled. So the high court of Guatemala set aside the conviction,

suspended the case and only now has it come back again to retrial.

And it's a retrial of both Rios Montt and his intelligence chief. But it's being held under special circumstances. It's closed to the public. Only the judge, and the lawyers, and witnesses can watch the proceedings. And Rios Montt is participating from a distance. He has video link up because supposedly his health is not good enough to be present in the courtroom.

And, as you said, there have been innumerable delays. It's not clear what's going to happen with this retrial. But, in a sense, the blow has already been struck. The original genocide case against Rios Montt included a full hearing of testimony from victims of the slaughter, thousands of pages of internal Guatemalan army documents were introduced into evidence. The court issued a massive and detailed decision of about 900 pages, justifying the 80-year sentence for Rios Montt. And also, demanding that he and the armed forces pay compensation to the massacre victims.

And with that, the acknowledgement was made that this genocide took place, that is was a criminal act, that it was a high crime. And the fact that the sentence has been suspended for the moment is more of a legal technicality. In moral terms, and in political terms, the blow has already been struck against Rios Montt. And there's a pretty fair chance that he will eventually die under house arrest.

DB: Let's talk about how close the U.S. government was to these killers. What did the U.S. officials know about the genocide based on the documents?

AN: Well, they knew, essentially, everything. But, more than that, they were participating in it. Rios Montt and the Guatemalan army were clients of the United States. Reagan personally endorsed Rios Montt at the height of the terror. He said he was getting a bum rap on human rights. He said he was a man of great integrity.

Congress was trying to block U.S. weapons supply to Guatemala, but the administration did a series of end runs to supply weapons, the most important of which involved the government of Israel. The U.S. brought in Israel, which supplied Galils and Uzis and also advisers to the Guatemalan military.

There were actual U.S. military personnel in Guatemala, working with the army as they were doing the massacres. I interviewed one of them, a Green Beret captain, Jesse Garcia, and ... I actually went on a maneuver with him. And he described how his instruction included how to destroy towns.

The U.S. also had CIA personnel, U.S. North American CIA personnel, working directly inside the G2, the military intelligence service which coordinated the

assassinations and disappearances. The CIA built a new operations center for the G2 near the Guatemala City airport.

The G2 directors, many of them were carried on the payroll of the CIA. And those included General Perez Molina, who was one of the officers who implemented the Rios Montt massacre policy in the countryside, and who later became president of Guatemala. And who just last year was overthrown by a popular uprising, and is now in jail for corruption.

And you mentioned that General Benedicto Lucas Garcia, the former army chief of staff, was one of those just arrested in this recent sweep by Guatemalan prosecutors. Really a very brave move on the part of those Guatemalan prosecutors, and on the part of the victims who came forward to give their testimony, and the human rights advocates in Guatemala, who are pushing these cases. General Benedicto was the favorite of the U.S. embassy. He was the brother, the right hand man, of the dictator who preceded Rios Montt, General Lucas Garcia.

And Benedicto worked hand in glove with the U.S. military attaché in Guatemala at the time, Colonel George Manis. And Manis and Benedicto jointly developed the tactic of the sweeps through the north-west highlands, which produced the massacres that got Rios Montt ultimately convicted for genocide.

It was under General Benedicto that these massacres started in a large way, and what Rios Montt did was he made them absolutely systematic. And Colonel Manis told me that it was he and Benedicto together who jointly developed this tactic.

So these mass killings were really a joint operation between the U.S. government and the Guatemalan army. And now the Guatemalan courts are, as we see, very bravely, step by step, bringing prosecutions. And they are making the argument, and so far, a successful argument, that these were in fact criminal acts.

And in a very interesting and revealing development, just the other day the current chief of staff of the Guatemalan army, General Sosa Diaz, went to court personally and asked the high court of Guatemala to grant legal protection to anyone who has perpetrated forced disappearance or genocide.

There's a current law on the books, the National Reconciliation Law, which grew out of the peace settlement between the guerrillas and the army in Guatemala, a deal that was reached in the 1990s. That deal gives a partial amnesty for some crimes to former guerrillas and former army officers. But it says that no amnesty will be given for anyone who perpetrated forced disappearance or genocide.

But now the current Guatemalan army chief of staff is going to court to try to

overturn that part of the law, to basically say “Well, if you committed genocide or if you committed forced disappearance, it’s okay. You can’t be prosecuted for that.” That’s what he’s trying to accomplish.

DB: Allan, that brings us to the fact that last Thursday, I believe it was, the new president, the former comedian, Jimmy Morales, was sworn in as Guatemala’s new president. His election was supposedly a response to the corruption of the former president. Is Jimmy Morales clean? What can we say about him?

AN: Well, Jimmy Morales got elected mainly because of the timing of the Guatemalan presidential election. The election date was set long in advance, and as it happened the popular uprising which toppled General Perez Molina, the previous president, and also his vice president, that culminated just weeks before the scheduled presidential election.

So when the election was held the only candidates available were all members of the system in Guatemala. The system that people had been rising up and rebelling against. They all had the backing, all the major candidates who had a chance of being elected, had the backing of either killer army officers, drug cartels, or oligarchs.

So it was just a question of choosing among them. And I was in Guatemala at the time. And what everyone I spoke to said was that they were choosing Jimmy simply because he had never been in office before. He had not yet had a chance to steal and abuse the law unlike the other candidates who had already been in there. And also he was a better speaker, he was more articulate. And so he got into office.

It so happened the forces that were backing Jimmy [were] from the political party called FCN. They represent the worst of the massacre officers. The FCN was created by an association of former military officers and when these officers created [it], they said explicitly that they were creating the party in order to shield themselves and their colleagues from prosecution for atrocities. They knew that they had committed massacres, and gang rapes, and forced disappearances, and mass torture. And they knew that they could be prosecuted for that.

So they formed a political party to try to prevent that. And this is the political party that has now brought Jimmy Morales to power. However, it’s not clear that that party will succeed in its agenda because a lot of Guatemalan society is on its feet.

And one of the very remarkable aspects of these mass arrests that took place just days before Morales was sworn in as the new president was that they included some people very close to Morales from ... the FCN political party.

And one of those whose initial charges were filed against was Jimmy Morales's right hand man, Colonel Maldonado, who is currently a member of congress. He is the head of Morales's party delegation in congress. The attorney general's office of Guatemala filed initial charges against him, trying to strip his congressional immunity so that he too can be arrested and put on trial with the other officers.

So this legal case is a very serious challenge to the power base of the new president. And it's not clear at this moment that those army officers are going to be able to prevail in protecting themselves, and dominating this new administration. It's a struggle for power. It's a real, ongoing uprising in Guatemala and the outcome is still uncertain.

DB: Allan, I just want to press you a little bit more to lay out the kind of connections that have existed between the U.S. and the mass murderers of Guatemala. I know that you did extraordinary work on the case of Hector Gramajo. Now, Gramajo was very important because, I believe, he was the army chief of staff for the purge of the highlands in Guatemala. He was clearly a mass murderer. He was later welcomed to Harvard and the Kennedy School where I think he was getting either a BA or a Masters in Government to go back and I guess become a politician.

Could you talk more about that close working relationship between the U.S. and Guatemala that would bring this mass murderer to the Kennedy School for another cleansing to go back home and run for president. It's an extraordinary thing.

AN: Yes, Gramajo was one of the top U.S. protégés. The U.S. was supporting the Guatemalan army as a whole during these mass killings that claimed anywhere from maybe 100,000, to some estimated 250,000 civilians. It's not clear, the exact number, but it was a mass murder of civilians. It employed the tactics that we see today on the ISIS videos. They frequently did decapitations, crucifixions, they enslaved people, particularly women, they violated them sexually. This was the most extreme kind of terror one can imagine.

Gramajo was one of the specific favorites of the U.S. He was the man who did a lot of the operational planning for the Rios Montt massacres of the highlands. The U.S. Pentagon officials I talked to spoke about how they would bring Gramajo to the U.S. for speaking and study tours, where they would bring him around the U.S. bases, to Fort Benning, Fort Bragg, Fort Leavenworth. And after Rios Montt was overthrown, and after Gramajo finished his various posts within the Guatemalan army, the U.S. brought him up to Harvard to get a masters. And they were grooming him to go back to become president of Guatemala.

That plan was derailed when a U.S. federal lawsuit under the Alien Tort Claims

Act was filed against Gramajo. This was filed by survivors from Guatemala of massacres and the torture. And he was called to appear in U.S. federal court to defend himself. He refused to do so. I testified as a witness in that case against Gramajo, but Gramajo himself did not show. He fled back to Guatemala.

And the court ultimately ordered him to pay, I believe it was \$13 million in damages to victims. Which he refused to pay. But the case ended up damaging him politically. And it apparently sank his prospects of later becoming the U.S.-sponsored president of Guatemala. But Gramajo is just one of many.

General Benedicto, another of the U.S. protégés who is now on trial, who can now be seen being led into the courtroom and out in handcuffs, once reigned supreme, as the army was launching the massacres in the highlands. And he was doing that hand in hand with his buddy Colonel Manis. Manis would talk about how much he respected and loved General Benedicto. He said "I'd follow that son-of-a-bitch anywhere." This was a collaboration, a joint project between the Guatemalan army and the U.S.

And [] there are two criminal cases that formed the basis of the recent arrests of the Guatemalan officers. One concerns the Guatemalan army base at Coban, where there have been exhumations of more than 550 skeletons, victims of executions by the army.

At least 22 of these skeletons were infants. Many of the adults were still, the skeletons that were exhumed, were still blindfolded. Some still had their wrists bound. Others had their ankles bound together. Even in the decayed condition of these people, forensic anthropologists could still tell in some cases there were signs of torture. In many, [] they could see that they were executed with gunshots to the head; in many cases to the back of the head.

And they were able to trace the DNA from these remains back to the families of some of the massacre survivors. Many of those brought to the Coban base, and later raped, and tortured, and executed were taken from the sites of massacres, surrounding the Chixoy Dam Project. This was a dam project that was sponsored by the World Bank.

And the local managers of the project asked, this was according to testimony in the recent court case, they asked the army to clear the population from local villages. So the army did this by going into the villages and massacring and causing people to flee. And many of those civilians, especially women and children, were captured by the army, taken away on helicopters. Some of those helicopters the pool of helicopters on the job he was working with was supplied by the U.S., by the CIA, or by Guatemalan oligarchs.

They flew them in helicopters to the Coban base. They were then abused in unthinkable ways and executed, their bodies thrown into pits. But now through DNA tracing they've been able to trace these remains back to the survivors in their home villages. And this is one of the pillars of the criminal cases against the Guatemalan officers.

The other case concerns a young man who was 15 years old. He was snatched from his home by army commandos. They threw a bag over his head, they taped his mouth, he was never seen again. They went hunting for him because his sister, his older sister had been held at their base. They had captured her because she had been distributing leaflets criticizing the army.

So they had been holding her as a prisoner, where they had been raping and torturing her, but she had been denied food, and she reportedly was so thin she was able to slip out between bars of one of the cells she was being held in.

DB: Wow.

AN: So, in revenge for her escape, they went and snatched the boy, the young man. And he has never been seen again. And so that case is the second case that forms the basis of the current prosecutions against the officers. Many of those now under arrest are officials of G2, the military intelligence service.

And it's G2 which was the branch of the Guatemalan army that worked, perhaps, most closely with the U.S. And it was the CIA that handled the G2. At least three of the G2 chiefs were directly on the U.S. payroll. And there were actual North Americans. ...

Guatemalan prosecutors would have the right ... they would have strong legal grounds for subpoenaing the U.S. embassy to produce these individuals as witnesses, or possible subjects for prosecution, in Guatemalan courts.

And, perhaps more significantly, we also know the names of the CIA station chiefs in Guatemala at the time of the atrocities. I published the names in The Nation magazine in 1995. And I was actually able to speak to three of the four CIA station chiefs who were there during the slaughter. And it's figures like that who also could be brought into Guatemalan courts if the U.S. would agree to extradition.

And, of course, even more importantly, the higher-level U.S. figures, those who actually made the policy, that sent these ... CIA personnel into help run these torture units. People like Elliott Abrams, who made the policy. They should be subject to prosecution, as well. It's fitting that people like General Benedicto, Lucas Garcia are now standing trial for the crimes in Guatemala. But people like Elliott Abrams should be sitting in the dark right next to them.

DB: Now, it's still very dangerous in Guatemala to tell the truth about what happened, in terms of an individual telling their truth or a community group. It's still extremely dangerous because of the power that these killers still hold in the country and in the culture.

AN: Yes, it is. In fact, during the Rios Montt genocide trial in 2013, where I was called to testify and was scheduled to testify, but was kept off the stand by pressure from then-President General Perez Molina. During that trial, there were constant death threats against the judges in the case, against the prosecutors, and against the witnesses who were survivors of the massacres, and the families of the witnesses.

And after the case, there was fierce political and legal persecution of the prosecutors and the judges. And, in fact, the judge who presided over the trial in a very tough and courageous manner, and who ultimately issued the 80-year sentence on behalf of the court against Rios Montt, was actually disbarred for a time on completely fake, trumped-up charges, brought against her by the Guatemalan oligarchy.

And the attorney general at the time who had helped to bring the genocide case against Rios Montt, Claudio Paz y Paz, is also being hounded to this day by the Guatemalan oligarchs and the former officers. And they, and especially the witnesses, especially the people from the villages whose aunts and uncles, and fathers and mothers, and sisters and brothers, those who were slaughtered ... those witnesses who come forward, they are taking a tremendous risk. And that's one of the reasons why, when the attorney general's office drew up these charges against the officers just before the inauguration of President Morales, there was a lot of shock in Guatemala. People were stunned at the boldness of this move.

But as soon as they got into court, a few days later, and they started presenting the evidence. ... They put up slides where they showed the internal army planning documents, they showed pictures of the exhumed corpses, now skeletons, from the Coban army base. They had testimony from former soldiers, some of them speaking anonymously, where they described how they would systematically gang rape, and torture, and execute the civilians they had brought onto the base. As the power of that evidence was presented in court, people could see that, yes, this case has a very strong factual and legal basis.

But the only reason that such cases hadn't been brought on earlier this is now quite a few years after these crimes was because of fear. And because of political power, that held back the enforcement of law. But remarkably, at least on some fronts, Guatemala is now going forward, and they are way ahead of the U.S. anytime.

It's inconceivable still in the U.S. today, that any case of this nature could be brought against, say George W. Bush, for the deaths resulting from the invasion of Iraq, or President Obama, for the civilian deaths resulting from the drone strikes. Or, specifically, against the U.S. officials like Abrams, who played the role of facilitator and accomplice and accessory and intellectual authors to these very same crimes in Guatemala. We can't mount these prosecutions in the U.S. because we're not yet ready to enforce the murder laws in the U.S. against high state officials. But in Guatemala some people are brave enough, and honest enough, to start doing that there. We should learn from them.

[For more on how President Reagan and his administration abetted genocide in Guatemala, see Consortiumnews.com's "[How Reagan Promoted Genocide.](#)"]

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