

The Resurgence of Violence in Guatemala

By Raúl Molina Mejía

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Guatemala today finds itself in the midst of a deep social, economic, and political crisis after the failure to meet the expectations raised by the 1996 signature of the Peace Accord.¹ The peace process, once heralded by the United Nations as a "success story" because it ended 36 years of internal armed conflict, is at the point of stagnation. On July 12, 2001, the UN Under-Secretary General Iqbal Riza, upon completing his visit to the country, called for a dialogue among all social and political forces to save and reactivate the peace process.

The ruling *Frente Republicano Guatemalteco* (FRG) has proved uninterested in carrying out the terms of the peace process and has increased social tensions in the country. In an effort to appeal to the impoverished masses, the government has been confrontational with the private sector and its political allies. At the same time, the FRG and the security forces have sought to organize those sectors of the population formerly close to the military in order to contain and overshadow leftist social movements. These pro-military sectors are responsible for a number of recent acts of violence.

At the height of the counterinsurgency campaigns of the early 1980s, the army established the Civil Defense Patrols (PACs), allegedly to defend rural communities from guerrilla attacks. In fact, the PACs served as a means to control the population and perpetrate abuses. While most of the PAC members were coerced into participating—and on many occasions were forced to perpetrate serious crimes on behalf of the armed forces—a significant number of their leaders sympathized with the army, which protected them and granted them certain

privileges, and from which they derived power. They became a part of a military-controlled network of civilians deeply involved with counterinsurgency operations and were feared by indigenous Guatemalans. During the peace negotiations, the Assembly of Civil Society (ASC)² as well as the UN Commission on Human Rights demanded the dismantling of the PACs.

The army conditioned their dissolution on the termination of the internal conflict, however, and the issue was one of the last scheduled for discussion during the peace process. In January 1996, Alvaro Arzú became the president of Guatemala and pledged to end the conflict by the end of the year. He unilaterally began dismantling the patrols before signing of the corresponding agreement. Although seen at the time as a good-will gesture, the process was carried out without proper scrutiny by MINUGUA, the UN mission in charge of monitoring human rights. Thus, while the civil patrols were formally disassembled and their arms returned to the army, their grip on power in their communities, their communication networks, and their privileges and links to the army were left untouched. Furthermore, they refused to turn in weapons they had acquired as individuals.

As a result, leaders of the PACs remained a factor in the power structure in the countryside, with the capacity to communicate among themselves and with the armed and security forces and to carry out acts of intimidation and violence. During Arzú's term, PAC leaders used instigation and propaganda to force the government to repeal a new property tax in 1998 and

to defeat the 1999 referendum to approve the constitutional reforms mandated by the Peace Accord. They also played a political role during the 1999 elections by supporting General Ríos Montt—who oversaw the most abusive period of the counterinsurgency war in the early 1980s—and the FRG. Although they continued to evoke terror within rural communities, they mainly used propaganda to amass votes, presenting the FRG as the defender of the poor against the *Partido de Avanzada Nacional* (PAN), portrayed as the party of the rich.³ In the aftermath of the FRG victory and the inauguration of President Alfonso Portillo, the former civil patrol leaders have become bolder and more violent. The former patrollers are being converted into a sort of shock troop force at the service of powerful, shadowy groups formed by active and former members of the armed and security forces, which invariably support the FRG.

In one case, on June 25, 2001, a group of armed men attacked the indigenous community of Los Cimientos, El Quiché. The men, who have been identified by human rights organizations as former PAC mem-

bers, burned 84 houses, raped three women, and temporarily abducted seven children. Although the conflict is presumably a land dispute, it represents the continuation of the bloody internal conflict of 1962 to 1996. Those attacked were the legitimate owners of the land who had left the country as refugees in the 1980s.⁴ Their lands were then given to people—friendly to the armed forces—who are not willing to give the land back to the original owners.

MINUGUA has also verified that since the signature of the Peace Accord, acts of lynching, a new phenomenon that pervades the country, are increasingly planned and instigated by former PAC leaders.⁵ Such lynchings illustrate a new dimension of the reorganization of the PACs taking place under the FRG government. The evidence suggests that sectors of the army and security forces are reactivating the patrols via use of the cadena⁶, or chain, in El Quiché. The cadena is a communication system in the countryside between military officers and former PAC leaders, coordinated from military garrisons, and reportedly utilized in several acts of lynching. This process, combined

with the FRG's strengthening of the armed and security forces, evokes earlier European fascism: the use of violent groups to quell legitimate resistance and pro-democracy movements; the organization of mass movements to provide backing for the FRG and the military; and the planning and execution of acts of violence, particularly by means of lynching, to terrorize society as well as to punish immediate victims. Guatemala's increasing violence highlights the failure of the peace process, but it also raises the question of whether Guatemala is moving toward neofascism.

*(Raúl Molina-Mejía
<molina2@un.org> is adjunct professor at New York University and executive director of the Rigoberta Menchu Tum Foundation in the United States; he was formerly the president of the National University San Carlos de Guatemala, the coordinator of the Representacion Unitaria de la Oposicion Guatemalteca (RUOG) and candidate for mayor of Guatemala City in the 1999 elections.)*

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Endnotes:

- ¹ The Firm and Lasting Peace Accord, mediated by the United Nations, was signed by the government of Guatemala and the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) on December 29, 1996.
- ² The Assembly of Civil Society (ASC) was created by the 1994 Framework Agreement signed by the government and the URNG, in order to convey the demands of the various organized sectors of Guatemalan society to the peace process negotiations table.
- ³ PAN won the national elections in 1995, and Alvaro Arzú, its leader, became president of Guatemala. His government signed the Peace Accord, but after an initial period of successful implementation of the Accord's provisions, later focused on imposing neoliberal policies, which have deepened the social and economic plight of the vast majorities in the country.
- ⁴ According to the Guatemalan Conference of Catholic Bishops, in the early 1980s the army's genocidal scorched-earth campaigns displaced more than one million persons in the Western Highlands, some 300,000 of whom became refugees in neighboring countries, particularly Mexico.
- ⁵ In its December 2000 Report, "Lynchings: A Scourge Against Human Dignity," MINUGUA states that it has confirmed that authorship by instigation is attributable to persons who belonged to structures of social and political control, including the PACs, created within the context of the counterinsurgency war.
- ⁶ Information about the cadena is available, but few persons have systematically studied it. Its existence can be traced to most areas that were highly contested during the internal armed conflict. The author is indebted to a U.S. scholar for the proper academic research on this matter, which soon will be published.