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Digging Up the Truth in Guatemala

by LADB Staff

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[The following article by Eduardo Garcia is reprinted with the permission of Noticias Aliadas in Lima, Peru. It appeared in the March 6, 2004, edition of Latinamerica Press.] Forensic anthropologists are digging up clandestine cemeteries and with it, thousands of human dramas. Carlos Paz Lopez, Dolores Chumes Chex, Feliza Tuyuc, Paulino Colaz, Mateo Chali are the names of some of the people who disappeared during the armed conflict in the village of Comalapa, two hours from Guatemala City.

On Feb. 25, celebrated as a national day for victims of the armed conflict, the Coordinadora Nacional de Viudas de Guatemala (CONAVIGUA) unveiled a monument in Comalapa with the names of the 250 local people who went missing during the war. Most of their bodies were never found. However, since August 2003, at CONAVIGUA's request, the Fundacion Antropologia Forense de Guatemala (FAFG) has been exploring the land surrounding the former military base in search of them (see NotiCen, 2002-06-27). The numbers, say the anthropologists, are not that important. Nevertheless, armed only with spades and with the help of neighbors, the FAFG is rewriting the history of Comalapa. They have dug 721 pits in the village and have found the bodies of 119 people 117 men, a woman, and a boy.

"A great number of the bodies show clear signs of violence," said Juan Carlos Gatica, a FAFG anthropologist. Most of the disappearances in Comalapa occurred between 1981 and 1983, according to the Comision para el Esclarecimiento Historico (CEH), and 81% of human rights abuses during the war took place during these three years, which included the military dictatorship of Gen. Efraim Rios Montt (1982-1983). The CEH calculated there are nearly 669 clandestine cemeteries in Guatemala (see NotiCen, 1999-04-15), although the FAFG estimates there are twice as many, around 1,300. The CEH report said 83.3% of the victims were Mayan, and 93% of human rights abuses were committed by government forces and the civil self-defense patrols.

In the last twelve years, the FAFG has unearthed around 3,000 corpses, some of them in individual tombs and others in mass graves. "If we carry on at this speed, it would take us 15 years to recover all the bodies," said Alan Robinson, the FAFG's director of forensic anthropology. However, "exhumations are not mathematics, the most important thing is the human dimension," said Jesus Hernandez of the Centro de Antropologia Forense y Ciencias Aplicada (CAFCA), another association of forensic anthropologists that has been carrying out exhumations since 1999.

Carmen Gomez of CONAVIGUA, one of the nearly 200 people looking for a relative in Comalapa, saw her husband for the last time on May 8, 1981, when two strangers burst into her house and took her husband away. "One of them said, 'One question only, we are going to ask him one question and we will let him go, sleep in peace with your children,'" said Gomez. Her husband, Felipe Pollan, at the time 24 years old, knew what was going to happen to him. Gomez said his last words to her were, "Goodbye forever, look after my children." Pollan never got to see his daughter, who was born

a few months after his disappearance. "Since we started, demand has been increasing, we are doing more and more exhumations with the passage of time, because fear is dying," Hernandez said.

The main goal of the anthropologists is to find the bodies of the disappeared and try to identify them by determining age, sex, height, and other individual features. Robinson said that the rate of success in identifying the bodies is quite high, 56%, given that they use a very basic technique. In the case of Comalapa, identification is more difficult because many bodies were brought from regions as far away as Huehuetenango or Quiche. However, their mission is more than technical because these organizations want the past to be remembered and justice to be done.

Additionally, they also want to end the widespread fear and help families of victims to overcome the psychological trauma caused by the conflict. Clandestine cemeteries not only epitomize victims' pain, they are also a symbol of impunity.

The need for justice is one of the main motivations of the anthropologists, and all exhumations are carried out after a formal request by the attorney general's office, which is then responsible for prosecuting each case. However, prosecutions are so far the exception rather than the rule. Hernandez said: "I think there is going to be justice, but it is wearing us out." He added, "The judiciary is very weak, but we have to carry on..., work has to be done with objectivity, always hoping that the cases are going to end in court."

The need to find the bodies of the disappeared, the most obvious proof of the brutality of the armed conflict, is evident in the light of declarations of those that deny that there was genocide in Guatemala. Among them are powerful people, some within President Oscar Berger's new government.

One is Otto Perez Molina, security and defense commissioner, whose role as a general in the department of El Quiche has been questioned some cast him as a pacifier while others say he was a brutal officer. "There was no genocide, because there was no attempt to exterminate a race...this was a battleground for the Cold War fight between the US and Russia. We provided the bodies and they provided the ideology," Perez Molina said. The work in the clandestine cemeteries "is not a revenge, we do it because we want them and us to have peace. As long as we do not know for a fact that they are dead it is very difficult to recover that peace and that tranquility," said Rosalina Tuyuc, founder of CONAVIGUA and one of the first congresswomen of Maya origin.

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