

7-22-2004

Can Reparations Heal in Guatemala?

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Can Reparations Heal in Guatemala?." (2004). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9216>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Can Reparations Heal in Guatemala?

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Guatemala

Published: 2004-07-22

[The following article by Jill Replogle is reprinted with the permission of Noticias Aliadas in Lima, Peru. It appeared in the July 14, 2004, edition of Latinamerica Press.] Faced by a crowd including hundreds of Mayan indigenous people in early July, victims of the armed conflict, President Oscar Berger asked for forgiveness for the state's role in human rights violations committed during the country's internal conflict, which ended in 1996.

"I ask Rosalina Tuyuc, woman, mother, and widow of the armed conflict, to accept, in the name of all the victims, the forgiveness I ask for today in the name of the state," said Berger. Tuyuc, former congresswoman and head of the Coordinadora Nacional de Viudas de Guatemala (CONAVIGUA), is president of the Comision Nacional de Resarcimiento (CNR) charged with compensating victims of the 36-year Guatemalan conflict.

More than 200,000 people were killed and another 50,000 disappeared during the war between left-wing rebels and state forces. Berger was presiding over a ceremony in which Tuyuc took over as president of the commission, which was established in July 2003. Berger also turned over the first disbursement of US\$3.8 million that will be used to compensate victims. The UN-sponsored truth commission (Comision para la Esclarecimiento Historico, CEH) attributed more than 90% of human rights abuses committed during the war to the Guatemalan armed forces and paramilitary groups.

The main forms of compensation requested by Mayan peoples and victims, according to Tuyuc, include economic attention for women, housing programs, scholarships, and psychological assistance. Tuyuc also asked the state to acknowledge its participation in genocide against the Mayan population during the war. Despite the fact that more than 80% of the victims identified by the truth commission were Mayan, the state has yet to recognize this crime.

The mood at the ceremony was festive, with many victims hopeful that Berger's government will follow through with its promise to fund the commission during its four-year term.

The administration has promised US\$38 million annually. "We can't ask them to give our parents back, but we hope they will help us economically and with housing," said Maria Raymundo de la Cruz, a Mayan woman from Nebaj, Quiche, one of the areas hardest hit by state-sponsored violence. De la Cruz's parents were both killed by the army in 1982, leaving her to fend for herself at age 12. Damacia Chaj Ceto, also from Nebaj, said she hopes for psychological help for her brother, who was kidnapped and tortured by the army when he was 18. Chaj Ceto said her brother has stopped talking as a result of the trauma he suffered.

The creation of the CER was the fruit of 10 years of pressure and negotiation by victims and human rights organizations, which have sought to hold the Guatemalan government responsible for moral and material damages inflicted upon the population during counterinsurgency campaigns.

The Guatemala state first committed formally to compensating victims in 1994 in the Global Agreement on Human Rights, signed between the government and the armed insurgency the Unidad Revolucionario Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG).

Other commitments guaranteeing reparations were the agreement that incorporated the URNG as a legal political party and the seating of the truth commission, both of which were part of the 1996 Peace Accords. The truth commission report, concluded in 1999, recommended a national reparations program for war victims and their relatives, including restoration of material possessions, economic compensation, psychosocial rehabilitation, and restoration of dignity. The latter would consist of acts of moral and symbolic reparation.

The truth commission also collected thousands of testimonies of human rights abuses. These, along with those collected by the Catholic Church's own truth commission and lists elaborated by local human rights and victims' organizations, will serve as the bases for identifying victims to be compensated, said Aura Elena Farfan, member of the CER. Although a pilot reparations project was established in 1999, until last year the government had failed to take the steps necessary for implementing a comprehensive plan for attending to victims' needs.

"We hope that this government goes a bit further than the pilot programs," said Tuyuc. The decree creating the reparations program calls for it to operate for 13 years, with the possibility of an extension. The program's work and success, however, will depend on Congress' willingness to pass a reparations law. While the commission has not stated when actual reparations will get underway, local groups are already preparing lists. Farfan is concerned that some groups may attempt to manipulate the process.

The biggest problem is that there are unscrupulous people in different regions of the country who are charging up to US\$250 [to put people's name on a list of beneficiaries] to receive reparations within three months," said Farfan. The limited funds available from the state are being fought for by former members of the Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil (PAC), paramilitaries organized by the armed forces to take part in counterinsurgency campaigns. The estimated 250,000 former PAC members are demanding to be paid for their earlier services (see NotiCen, 2004-07-01). In protest last year, the former PAC members forced Congress to authorize compensation for them.

-- End --