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## Enormous Wartime Archive Discovered In Guatemala

by LADB Staff

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The Procuraduria de Derechos Humanos de Guatemala (PDH) has discovered thousands of documents pertaining to human rights abuses committed at the height of the country's 36-year civil war that ended with the signing of peace accords in December 1996. The documents were found in the archives of the Policia Nacional (PN), the institution replaced by the Policia Nacional Civil (PNC) after war's end (see NotiCen, 1998-02-05).

"This is one of the most important discoveries in recent times, said PDH ombudsman Sergio Morales of the approximately 30,000 police files. Some pre- and postwar files were also found. They contain, said Morales, everything from the most trivial expense reports to extremely detailed evidence, including items "very delicate, like a book with information on children who were disappeared and to whom they were given." Morales said the ultimate destinations of thousands of murdered and disappeared individuals are to be found in the files. Some of the papers are in perfect condition, some deteriorated, and some partially burned but legible.

The files were found during a search of the headquarters of the Servicio de Desactivacion de Explosivos of the PNC in Guatemala City. Investigators were seeking old explosive materials when they came across at least 20 rooms packed with documents dated from 1935 to 2002. The building also housed the now defunct Policia Militar Ambulante and the Guardia de Hacienda, forces implicated in wartime crimes. The PN was just one of several branches of the country's security forces accused or determined to have carried out illegal detentions, disappearances, summary executions, kidnappings, and tortures, hallmarks of a war that may have claimed 200,000 lives.

### *A historian's analysis of the discovery*

Agreeing with Morales' estimate of the files, historian Arturo Taracena, resident researcher at the Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamerica (CIRMA), told El Periodico in an interview, "This is the archive of deeds that are decisive in the contemporary history of Guatemala; they must form part of the historical memory and serve to verify it." He said the discovery is documentation of police actions in urban areas and must be placed at the disposition of the justice system, investigators, academics, and the general public. Because the PN was militarized, the files also shed light on the participation of the Army in national affairs during the period.

As to the disposition of these records, Taracena said they ought to remain with the PDH for the moment, but eventually they should go to the Archivo Centroamericano in Guatemala City, as do the records of all ministries except the Army and Ministry of Foreign Relations. "If we want to have a true democracy and transform the country, we must know how the state functions and how it has done so over time. That is, to know those tiny details of the administration whose continuity tells us what kind of state we have." In this case, he said, the archives permit historians to understand not only discrete events but also the behavior of the PN during the last 70 years.

Taracena also wants work to begin on preservation and classification of the documents under the authority of the PDH to ensure they are not lost or stolen so they can be used in proceedings leading to prosecutions or investigations in individual cases of detention or disappearance. Above all, they need to be secure.

*The Archivo General de Centroamerica is the depository of historical documents that have been used during the years to prove land tenancy, verify historic events, and as legal evidence in other matters. Because of their importance and intrinsic value, documents have during the years been stolen for sale at auctions around the world or removed by regimes interested in preventing indigenous populations from reclaiming lands lost in the conquest.*

No guarantee of justice

Taracena cannot be sure that the PN documents will result in convictions of the guilty. He explained, "It is a difficult question. Every state has a memory and a written memory. Recently an Austrian historian who researched an archive on the holocaust said he never encountered a paper signed by Adolf Hitler that proposed the 'final solution.' But to the investigator the paper trail of a state makes clear the role that each ministry plays in a function, as, in that case, the holocaust. In Guatemala we cannot forget what happened; the mature thing to do is to make a rationalization of our history."

Procurador Morales agreed that classification of the documents must be done, cautioning that the job could take five or six years. He has sought judicial approval for his custody of the material and appears to be on a collision course with President Oscar Berger, who seemed to be taking a far more relaxed view of the documents. Berger acknowledged they "are part of our history," but wanted them taken to the Hemeroteca Nacional, the newspaper and periodical library, where they could be perused and handled by all and sundry. "I would like that they be archived and that whoever wants to can consult them without any problem," said the president. Berger's recommendation was immediately challenged by human rights, union, and student organizations.

Miguel Angel Albizures of the Centro para la Accion Legal en Derechos Humanos (Caldh) demanded the files be placed under guard. He recalled that the place where they were found was home to "authors of thousands of crimes perpetrated in Guatemala." Other rights leaders stressed the possibility of prosecutions. Alfonzo Bauer Paiz, perhaps the dean of Guatemalan activists, reminded the media, "The Constitution and the Peace Accords guarantee that the secret archives found must be published."

Bauer Paiz was a leader of the Revolution of 1944 that ushered in the only decade of democracy the country had ever known. A CIA-led coup crushed it in 1954 eventually plunging Guatemala into 36 years of civil war. The rights groups, backed by the Catholic Church's Oficina de Derechos

Humanos del Arzobispado (ODHA), have joined to guarantee the safety and preservation of the documents.

Mario Polanco of the Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (GAM), formed in the 1980s by the relatives of the disappeared, offered the organization's services to scan and photograph the documents, although Morales has already made plans for digitization. He plans to ask the assistance and cooperation of the groups to complete the task of removing the files and to do other sensitive work. Albizures has confirmed agreements among groups to do this. "We expect to collaborate with full-time personnel according to the requirements of the job," he said.

### *Government still reluctantly making amends*

The discovery of the records came almost on the day that the government was carrying out, under order of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR), an apology to the families of the victims of the 1982 massacre at Plan de Sanchez. Vice President Eduardo Stein traveled to the Rabinal, Baja Verapaz, site to beg the pardon of the surviving relatives of 263 people who were raped, tortured, and murdered there. The IACHR ordered last Nov. 24 that the state recognize and ask the pardon of the people. It was the first time the government has ever apologized for a massacre.

Stein was accompanied by a number of government officials, but none from the military. The survivors did not make it easy on Stein. "The vice president wanted to come, talk, and go. But we said no, that he had to accept our agenda, including seeing the dramatization, and listen to us first," said Juan Manuel Jeronimo, who lost 28 family members, including his wife, parents, and children.

In Guatemala, the war is not yet history. It will not become history until there is justice. Frank La Rue, presidential human rights commissioner, said at the ceremony, "Pardon without justice is not pardon." Rosalina Tuyuc, president of the Comision Nacional de Resarcimiento (CNR) said, "It's not enough to beg pardon for the harm. Now the most important thing is that the Public Ministry speed up the investigations and condemn those materially and intellectually responsible." With the recently discovered documentary evidence, that could begin to happen.

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