

8-4-2011

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Recommended Citation

Reynolds, Louisa. "Guatemalan Presidential Candidate Otto PÃ©rez Molina and the Ixil Triangle Massacres." (2011).
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Guatemalan Presidential Candidate Otto Pérez Molina and the Ixil Triangle Massacres

by Louisa Reynolds

Category/Department: Guatemala

Published: Thursday, August 4, 2011

The case against Héctor Mario López Fuentes, the former armed forces chief under the dictatorship of Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983), who was arrested on June 17 and accused of genocide and crimes against humanity, has brought to light uncomfortable truths for presidential candidate Otto Pérez Molina.

Guatemala's office for public prosecutions, the Ministerio Público (MP), accuses López Fuentes of being the intellectual author behind "Plan Sofía," a military strategy designed to crush guerrilla insurgents in the municipalities of Nebaj, Chajul, and San Juan Cotzal, in the highland department of Quiché, an area named by the Guatemalan Army the Ixil Triangle ([NotiCen, March 6, 2008](#)).

Plan Sofía was part of the nationwide Plan de Campaña Victoria 82, which aimed to destroy insurgents as well as the civilian population that purportedly harbored them, a strategy known as "quitarle el agua al pez" (draining the sea that the fish swim in).

During this period, the Fuerzas de Tarea were set up, temporary task forces made up of different military professionals—infantry, artillery, marines, and air force pilots—that were disbanded once they had concluded the specific mission for which they had been created and sent back to their original posts.

The Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (REHMI) report published by the Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala (ODHAG) defines these task forces as "special counteroffensive units" and their history is a long list of massacres, extrajudicial executions, forced disappearances, and acts of torture.

The MP accuses López Fuentes of "organizing the Guatemalan state in order to wage a counterinsurgency war, making each task force responsible for a specific geographical area, including the Ixil region, where the Gumarcaj Task Force was reorganized and strengthened."

The Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH), Guatemala's post-war truth and reconciliation commission, says that the Gumarcaj Task Force was created during the early 1980s to "neutralize the populations suspected of supporting subversives in the Ixil region."

Stationed in the municipality of Chajul, Quiché, this task force was used to attack the following villages: Xix, Tisis, Xolcuay, Batzul, Chichel, Pery, Xemal, Ilom, Chel, Cabá, Juá, Xecampanabitz, Sumalito, Juil, Chaxa, Sisibán, and Cajixay.

Survivors' accounts, compiled by the CEH, graphically illustrate the horrors that occurred in these villages: "After the massacre in Chel, on April 4, 1982, survivors sought refuge in the Xesai mountains. On April 22, after searching the villages of Cheputul, Cotzal, and Cabá, in Chajul, accompanied by the civil defense patrols [paramilitary units], Army soldiers reached a refuge close to Chesai.

"Around 5 p.m. in the afternoon, they surrounded the place where 50 people from the village of Chel were hiding, including children, women, and elderly men. The soldiers opened fire, killing 45 unarmed civilians; two people survived and three others disappeared. That night, the soldiers and paramilitaries returned to Chajul on foot.

"The following day, people who had sought refuge with the guerrillas near the village of Chel found the 45 bodies with multiple bullet wounds. They buried the corpses on the same day."

Pérez Molina and the Gumarcaj Task Force

According to a curriculum vitae published by the nongovernmental Washington-based National Security Archive (NAS), Otto Pérez Molina, the Partido Patriota (PP) candidate currently leading the polls with more than 40% of voter preference, was promoted to the rank of major in 1982 and sent to the Adolfo V. Hall military school, where he worked as an "intelligence officer" and later as an "operations officer."

Plan Sofía documents also reveal that in 1982 he was one of the commanders of the Gumarcaj Task Force.

This indicates that Pérez Molina was temporarily moved from the Adolfo V. Hall military school and assigned to that task force, says Marco Tulio Álvarez, director of the Archivos de Paz, a government-sponsored collection of wartime documents.

Army spokesman Rony Urizar said the curriculum vitae supplied by the NAS matches the information held by the armed forces regarding Pérez Molina's track record. However, Urizar said that the Army had no information on the role played by Pérez Molina in the Gumarcaj Task Force, as these temporary units were disbanded after fulfilling their mission and participating officers were returned to their original posts, which is why the time spent in the task force does not appear on official Army curricula.

One Plan Sofía document includes a list of Army soldiers, dated Aug. 15, 1982, who took part in a battle with guerrilla forces in Nebaj, Quiché. The list includes Pérez Molina as "infantry major," although it is not clear what his exact responsibilities were.

"We haven't traced him [Pérez Molina] in the formal structure of the armed forces, but we have found him in action in the battlefield. What cannot be denied is that he was there and that he was reporting from that theater of operations," says Álvarez.

What occurred in that theater of operations? The CEH says that, in the municipality of Chajul, where the Gumarcaj Task Force was stationed, 26 villages were totally or partially destroyed, 10 massacres occurred, 317 unarmed civilians were killed, and 9,000 people were displaced.

Pérez Molina's immediate superiors were Francisco Ángel Castellanos Góngora, head of Operation Sofía, and Héctor Mario López Fuentes, head of the armed forces, who currently faces trial for genocide and crimes against humanity.

Could the López Fuentes trial pave the way for Pérez Molina to be prosecuted? Mario Minera, director of the Centro de Acción Legal en Derechos Humanos (CALDH), a local human rights organization, says that it is still too early to speculate on this issue and that, "as each of the facts are brought to light, it might be possible to prove Pérez Molina's connections to and responsibilities for the massacres."

"Prove to me that genocide occurred in this country," Pérez Molina defiantly told Guatemalan journalist Martín Rodríguez in a recent interview. "Populations were never exterminated for racial or religious reasons. The reason behind what happened was that there were people involved in subversive actions on the battlefield."

Pérez Molina went on to blame the Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP) guerrilla group for arming civilians, and he holds them responsible for the massacres. The PP candidate added that to talk about genocide is "to blow things out of proportion, to insist on a single issue, to use inappropriate terms for something that didn't happen, to revive the Civil War."

For Guatemala's human rights movements, it is clear that the armed conflict holds uncomfortable facts that Pérez Molina would rather forget.

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