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Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes Draws Fire on Both Sides for Military Appointments, Massacre Apology

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The first Salvadoran leader to visit El Mozote since the infamous four-day killing spree, which soldiers carried out in and around the northern town between Dec. 10 and Dec. 13, 1981, Funes is also the first president to officially apologize for what he called "the worst massacre of civilians in contemporary Latin American history." An estimated 936 townspeople, many of them women and children, lost their lives in the horrifying attacks.

"I come on this historic morning to assume the responsibly that my predecessors, regrettably, did not want or did not stir themselves to assume," the visibly emotional president said during a Jan. 16 ceremony in El Mozote. "For this massacre, for the abhorrent violations of human rights and the abuses perpetrated in the name of the Salvadoran state, I ask forgiveness of the families of the victims."

Thanks to an amnesty law rushed through in 1993 (NotiCen, March 26, 1993) by the government of then President Alfredo Cristiani (1989-1994), no one has ever been convicted for either planning or executing the El Mozote massacre. Cristiani, who has been implicated in some civil war abuses, continues to head El Salvador’s main opposition party, the far-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA).

Historically, some lawmakers from the governing Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) have also backed the amnesty. Before reinventing itself as a political party, the FMLN was a coalition of leftist guerilla groups that fought El Salvador’s US-backed armed forces until agreeing—via the peace accords it signed with Cristiani—to lay down its arms. The two sides finalized the historic accords on Jan. 16, 1992, in Mexico City’s Chapultepec Castle.

Overall, an estimated 75,000 people were killed during the civil war. Another 8,000 disappeared, according to human rights groups. President Funes, a former television journalist who covered the war, lost a brother to the conflict. Although atrocities were committed on both sides, the Comisión de la Verdad Para El Salvador (CVES), formed as part of the peace accords, concluded that state security forces committed approximately 85% of the acts of violence.

The CVES determined that, in the case of El Mozote, the perpetrators were members of the Army’s notorious Atlacatl Battalion. Their immunity from prosecution is a bitter pill to swallow for many of the victims’ family members, as is the fact that so little has been done to investigate or even officially acknowledge that the killings occurred.

"There are still graves here that have not been exhumed," 67-year-old El Mozote resident Antonio Castro, who lost most of his family during the four-day barrage, told Diario Co Latino. "The
massacre was in 1981, and, still, no one has the information they want, no one has received any information."

**Finally willing to name names**

President Funes did not promise his audience in El Mozote that the soldiers responsible for the massacre would be prosecuted. But he did break the code of silence practiced by his conservative predecessors when he mentioned by name three of the senior officers who, according to the CVES, were involved in the massacre: José Armando Azmitia, Natividad de Jesús Cáceres, and Domingo Monterrosa, the Atlacatl Battalion’s top commander (NotiCen, March 23, 1993).

After his death in 1984, Monterrosa was hailed by both the Salvadoran legislature and the military as a national hero. He continues to have a brigade named after him, as well as a special section in the country’s official military museum. Funes’ rightist predecessor, President Elías Antonio Saca (2004-2009), said in a 2007 speech that "Col. Monterrosa and other soldiers who spilled their blood knew how to valiantly defend the country against the communist aggression."

Funes said that, as commander and chief of the armed forces, he "instructed" the military to "revise its interpretation of history" and to stop using texts and symbols that celebrate its most controversial civil-war exploits. "I make a similar plea to all political parties, that they stop exalting the names of people who could have been involved in human rights violations or other actions that caused death and suffering," he said. "Rather than helping form a culture of peace, they cause polarization and division in Salvadoran society."

The president’s emotional apology was well-received by human rights groups and by people like El Mozote’s Antonio Castro, who attended the speech in person. "We’re on the right track, one that can give us answers," he said. "I have faith. Look where the president is now. Those other [presidents] were cowards. This is the truth, right here."

Óscar Luna, El Salvador’s procurador general de derechos humanos, praised the speech as well, calling it "very correct and very honest." He said it was particularly important that Funes made his apology in El Mozote, where the horrific events took place. "It was an act of solidarity with the victims of the massacre," Luna told reporters. "It seems right to me that he would recognize the responsibility of the state and ask forgiveness."

Not everyone agrees. The president’s speech drew fierce rebukes from some members of the far-right ARENA, which controlled the presidency for 20 years before ceding power to Funes and the FMLN in 2009. ARENA Deputy Mario Valiente said the president’s apology was both one-sided and unnecessary. "When the amnesty law was signed, that was an apology, an effort to move on," he said. "We can’t keep apologizing every year, especially since it [the FMLN] has never apologized to the other side [the armed forces]."

Sigifredo Ochoa Pérez, a former Army colonel who is running for a seat in El Salvador’s unicameral Asamblea Legislativa (AL), was even more critical of the president’s speech, which he described as an "attack" on the military and a source of embarrassment for the high command. "What right does the president have to apologize on behalf of everyone?" he said. "For us, Azmitia and Monterrosa are heroes. [Funes] shouldn’t be involved in this business of wanting to change history, ordering us to do so. What kind of order? He’s not an all powerful king, he’s a president who’s only going to last five years."
Inviting the military back in

Ironically, Funes’ relationship vis-à-vis the armed forces has also been a sore spot of late for critics on the left. While Ochoa Pérez accuses him of exerting too much authority on the military, human rights defenders and many in the FMLN—which Funes represented in the last election even though he is technically not a party member—say the president is ceding too much power to the armed forces.

Exactly one week after appearing in El Mozote, Funes named Francisco Ramón Salinas Rivera, a former Army general who retired from the military just days before, to head El Salvador’s Policía Nacional Civil (PNC). Last November, the president chose another former military man, retired Gen. David Munguía Payés, as security minister (NotiCen, Jan. 5, 2012).

Critics say the appointments violate both the spirit and letter of the very peace accords Funes made such of point of celebrating last month. The peace accords, they point out, called for the military to stay out of domestic affairs. The president, in contrast, seems to be inviting it back in—not only by appointing former military officers to key domestic security posts but also by expanding the Army, sending soldiers in to guard the country’s dangerous and grossly overcrowded prisons, and authorizing Army personnel to assist regular police in domestic crime-fighting duties.

"The choice of Gen. Salinas is another step toward the dismantling of the democratic and civilian doctrine behind our public security and openly contravenes the peace accords and the Constitution," the FMLN said in a statement.

Funes defends the appointments and expansion of the military as necessary to try to bring El Salvador’s stubborn violent-crime epidemic under control. The PNC reported more than 4,300 murders last year, up from 4,085 in 2010. A recent report by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) said El Salvador has an average of 66 homicides for every 100,000 residents, making it the world’s second-most-violent non-war-zone country in the world after Honduras (NotiCen, Oct. 27, 2011). The world average is 6.6 murders per 100,000 residents.

"What society asks and demands from us are results, and the president seeks results, not sterile debates or discussions," Funes said upon presenting the new PNC head.

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