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## **Guatemala: Summary Of Report By Americas Watch & Physicians For Human Rights**

*by Deborah Tyroler*

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On Sept. 14, the US-based organizations Americas Watch and Physicians for Human Rights released a joint report titled, "Guatemala: Getting Away with Murder." Highlights from the report are summarized below. \* Six years of civilian government has failed to improve the human rights situation in Guatemala. Investigations of human rights abuses thus far have been a "total failure," and members of public security forces continue to enjoy complete impunity. \* "[E]ven more alarming [is]...the ruthless campaign of terror" against persons seeking to document or investigate abuses. Since the installation of former president Vinicio Cerezo in 1986, 23 human rights activists have been killed or disappeared by security forces or civilian patrols (PACs). \* "Getting away with murder in Guatemala is easy," due to lack of expertise, resources and authority on the part of the judicial system and forensic investigators. In addition, "The entire system is subverted by the involvement of government [security] forces in the same crimes they are supposed to investigate." \* Investigations of the 1990 Santiago Atitlan massacre and the murder of anthropologist Myrna Mack were mishandled. Investigations in Santiago Atitlan did not commence until more than one month after the massacre occurred. Eight months later, despite the testimony of hundreds, no one has been formally accused of involvement in the murders. In the investigation of the anthropologist's murder, police "lost or destroyed much of the essential evidence...and chief homicide investigator for the National Police, Jose Miguel Merida, was murdered when he promised to collaborate with officials to identify senior military officers implicated in the murder." \* During the first eight months of President Jorge Serrano's administration, public security forces have continued the practices of torture, "extra-judicial execution," and abduction with total impunity, despite pledges from Serrano that he would establish the rule of law. Soldiers and police have also led or participated in horrendous crimes against children living in the streets of Guatemala City. \* The army was responsible for tens of thousands of murders committed during the "scorched earth" policy implemented in the early 1980s. Hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of clandestine graves exist in the Guatemalan highlands. The report dismissed the army's claims that the sites are burial grounds for rebels killed in combat. PAC members have attempted to obstruct exhumations and investigations of the grave sites. (Basic data from AFP, 09/14/91; Inter Press Service, EFE 09/15/19)

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