

1-18-2001

## President Moscoso Calls for Truth Commission

LADB Staff

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

---

### Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "President Moscoso Calls for Truth Commission." (2001). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/8796>

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](mailto:amywinter@unm.edu).

## President Moscoso Calls for Truth Commission

*by LADB Staff*

*Category/Department: Panama*

*Published: 2001-01-18*

In December, President Mireya Moscoso announced the creation of a truth commission to clarify some 150 assassination and disappearance cases going back to the 1968- 1989 military dictatorship. The step was prompted by new discoveries of clandestine graves believed to date from that period. The truth-commission proposal has polarized opinion because the opposition Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD) was founded during the dictatorship, and party leaders accuse the administration of trying to use the discovery of the graves for political advantage.

The military dictatorship began when Gen. Omar Torrijos overthrew President Arnulfo Arias in a 1968 coup, and he headed a populist military regime until his death in a helicopter crash in 1981. His successor, Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, ruled until ousted by the US military invasion in December 1989 (see Update, 1989-12-20). Arias later married Moscoso, who, after Arias' death, took over leadership of the Partido Arnulfista and defeated Torrijos' son Martin Torrijos in the 1999 presidential election.

Families of the disappeared have said for years that opponents of the Torrijos-Noriega regimes were killed and buried in clandestine graves. In September 1999, Moscoso promised to open an investigation after the remains of Colombian priest Jose Hector Gallego were found at Los Pumas de Tocumen military base near the capital. Gallego was murdered by the military in 1971 (see NotiCen, 1999-10-21). Exploration for other victims at Los Pumas was halted because of a shortage of funds. The base, which belonged to the now defunct Fuerza de Defensa, is located outside Panama City near the Tocumen international airport.

On Dec. 18, Moscoso ordered the attorney general to renew the search at Los Pumas, and three more corpses were found there. One of the bodies was identified as that of Heliodoro Portugal, a student leader assassinated in 1972. Opposition accuses president of politicizing victims. In defense of his father, Martin Torrijos, now secretary general of the PRD, accused Moscoso of trying to take political advantage of the discoveries to make gains against his party. He also accused Moscoso of practicing "selective justice." He said that the investigation was focused solely on the 1968-1989 period and that no attention was being given to disappearances and assassinations during the Arias regime or to the Panamanians killed in the US invasion of 1989. There have been reports that US troops killed people at the Tocumen airport and dumped their bodies nearby. A common grave with the bodies of 15 Panamanians purportedly killed at the time of the invasion was found in 1990 in the Caribbean port city of Colon (see Update, 1990-08-03).

Torrijos and others warned that the truth commission had to be free of political motivation. When Arnulfista legislators proposed the commission in the Legislative Assembly, the debate grew acrimonious. Former President Ernesto Perez Balladares (1994-1999) also advised the government against an investigation limited to the Torrijos-Noriega period.

Moscoso reminded Perez Balladares that he had served in the government during the dictatorship. She said he had forgotten about the clandestine graves, and, during his presidency, "he never did anything to help the families find their disappeared relatives." Graves become election issue Aside from the political skirmishes regarding the truth commission, the controversy surrounding the disappeared appears to mark the unofficial start of the next presidential campaign.

In the midst of his attacks on Moscoso, Torrijos has asserted he will win the presidency in 2004. If necessary, he said, his party will take to the streets to prevent Panama's collapse from "the errors of the present Arnulfista government." The truth commission is beginning to loom as a decisive event in the next election. Some commentators are saying that Torrijos' unusually vitriolic attacks on Moscoso are aimed at pulling together a divided PRD, a party that could be further hurt by any revelations linking its founder to the cadavers at Los Pumas. Since some military have already been convicted of killing the regime's opponents, even the fair-minded commission the PRD wants could very well renew old animosities against the dictatorship.

But retired Gen. Ruben Dario Paredes, who supports the truth commission, said Gen. Torrijos was far removed from the executions and subsequent burials at Los Pumas. He added, however, that the orders had to have come from a high-ranking officer. Former US President Jimmy Carter said he was sure Gen. Torrijos had nothing to do with the assassinations. Carter, who negotiated the canal turnover with Torrijos, said the general was "a man of honor and justice."

Intensifying the pressure on Moscoso for a truth commission was an announcement by the attorney general on Dec. 26 that another body the fourth in December had been unearthed at Los Pumas. Authorities said the remains might be those of Andres Fistonich, a member of Gen. Torrijos' guard. A fifth corpse was found Dec. 28. A witness produced by the Catholic Church said that at least 10 more bodies were buried in the same general area where the others were discovered. Families of the victims objected to the attorney general's office handling the remains and guarding the evidence. The Comité de Familiares de los Desaparecidos de Panama Hector Gallego (COFADEPA-HG) asked to take part in the procedures.

In January, COFADEPA-HG wrote Attorney General Jose Antonio Sossa that it had received information that there were more clandestine graves as yet unexamined. The letter also criticized Sossa for hiding information about Los Pumas and keeping the media away from the grave sites. Forensic experts from the US have been called in to examine the remains. DNA comparisons are to be made with blood samples taken from relatives.

Arturo Meneses, a former sergeant in the Fuerza de Defensa, who helped dig up the grave sites, said in January that he was threatened with death if he revealed the names of any military personnel involved in the assassinations. During his time with the Fuerza de Defensa, Meneses worked in the motor pool at Los Pumas, where the clandestine graves were found. Meneses said that he had "vague suspicions" about who was behind the threat and that in due time he would lodge a complaint. He said some military people thought he had information about the assassinations because he was mistakenly identified on television news as a witness. He said he was only hired by the attorney general for the excavation crew and would not say whether he had any information or whether he was present when the bodies were buried.

In a related incident, a former inmate in the island prison on Coiba off the coast of Veraguas province claimed the body of a student leader, missing since 1969, was buried in the cemetery of the prison. In an interview with the daily El Panama America in January, Ismael Brivo said he was ordered to bury Floyd Britton, leader of the Frente Estudiantil Revolucionario (FER-29), who was allegedly killed by prison guards in 1969.

-- End --