

5-2-2002

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Truth Commission Delivers it's Report." (2002). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/8954>

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Truth Commission Delivers it's Report

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Panama

Published: 2002-05-02

Panama's truth commission (Comision de la Verdad) issued its final report to organizations representing the victims of torture, assassination, and disappearance during the military regime headed first by Gen. Omar Torrijos (1960-1981) and then by Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega (1981-1988). The report confirms the culpability of the military and recommends reparations to relatives of the victims.

The commission came into being after the discovery of what are thought to be the remains of Jose Hector Gallego, a Colombian priest abducted by the military in 1971. The remains were found on a military base in 1999 (see NotiCen, 1999-01-21). President Mireya Moscoso, whose late husband Arnulfo Arias was ousted as president in a 1968 military coup led by Torrijos, set up the truth commission in December 2000 to investigate the Gallego gravesite and others found around the country. The commission continued its work from early 2001 until April 2002 despite setbacks caused by a lack of funds and opposition from the Partido Revolucionario Democratico (PRD) the party founded by Torrijos. His son Martin is secretary general of the PRD (see NotiCen, 2001-01-18).

In January 2001, PRD president Balbina Herrera threatened to ask the courts to invalidate the presidential order creating the commission (see NotiCen, 2001-01-18). In January of this year, commission president Alberto Almanza complained that US anthropologist Sandy Anderson, who headed a forensic team, and the team's bloodhound Eagle had been threatened because of their work locating graves. The commission formally delivered its report April 17 during a special mass in the Metropolitan Cathedral in Panama City.

Receiving the 700-page document were two of the groups representing relatives of the victims, the Comite de Familiares de Desaparecidos de Panama (COFADEPA) and the Comite de Familiares de Desaparecidos de Panama-Hector Gallego (COFADEPA-HG). President Moscoso, Cabinet ministers and commission president Almanza attended. The report documents 110 of the 148 cases the truth commission examined. Seventy of the victims were murdered and 40 were disappeared. Most of the violations took place between 1968 and 1972 against supporters of former President Arias. Some 40 other cases are yet to be investigated.

The major part of the commission's work was to locate clandestine graves, determine the identity of the victims, and fix the circumstances of their deaths. The commission discovered 24 sites and excavated 36 graves, many of which were located in military buildings in the provinces of Panama and Bocas del Toro, and at the prison facility on Coiba Island off the Pacific coast. Other graves were found under the runway of the Tocumen military airport, on the grounds of houses occupied by Panamanian Air Force pilots, in the old Los Pumas infantry barracks in Tocumen, and the firing range on the same base.

More graves were found at the old cavalry base in Panama Viejo, on the grounds of the Joyita prison in Pacora, and at houses in the capital used by the secret police and other security units to interrogate and torture victims. Besides Gallego, the remains of other well-known victims of torture were discovered, including Dora Moreno, Hipolito Quintero, Floyd Britton, Encarnacion Gonzalez, and Hugo Spadafora. Report condemns military The report's overall conclusion was that the military regime engaged in "torture [and] cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment" of its victims.

The commission recommended further systematic excavations at other suspected gravesites and advised the president to reactivate the office of special prosecutor to take legal action against those suspected of committing the atrocities. The commission also recommended that the government accept its obligations under international law relating to human rights by compensating relatives of the victims. It recommended the creation of a permanent government agency to take over the work of the commission and maintain its files.

Moscoso said she agreed with the recommendation to compensate families of the victims and suggested an extension of the truth commission's term. The commission report concluded that Gen. Torrijos was not directly involved in the deaths and disappearances. Almanza told Notimex that Torrijos' name does not appear in any of the documents supplied the commission by the US State Department. Noriega's name however does appear.

Panamanian authorities have asked the US to allow their investigators to interrogate Noriega, who is serving a 40-year sentence in a Miami prison. Authorities are interested in what Noriega might know about the 1970 disappearance of opposition leader Heliodoro Portugal. Portugal is thought have been killed on a military base in Tocumen.

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