A genocide tribunal for Guatemala

By Andrew Reding

Note: text in maroon was cut from original Pacific News Service wire version.

President Clinton’s apology for U.S. support of Guatemalan governments that engaged in mass slaughter of civilians is both welcome and appropriate. It should be followed up with a call for a genocide tribunal similar to those already in place for Rwanda and Bosnia.

Last month, the Commission for Historical Clarification, created under the 1996 peace accords, exposed the ugly truth about Guatemala’s civil conflict. It said that in the early 1980s, the Guatemalan military, acting on orders from the country’s highest authorities, carried out genocide against the country’s majority Mayan population.

That they did so using officers trained in counterinsurgency by the United States—and at a time when the White House was signaling the abandonment of human rights standards in foreign policy—makes the United States share in the responsibility.

Guatemala was an American Rwanda. The army and its paramilitary allies carried out at least 626 massacres, many of entire villages. Security forces slaughtered civilians without regard for age or sex, impaling, slashing, skinning and otherwise butchering their victims. They impaled and shot children. They raped women, and slashed open the wombs of pregnant women. They skinned, amputated, and burned victims alive. They forced townsfolk to watch as they disemboweled still-living relatives and neighbors. At gunpoint, they forced Mayans to kill fellow-villagers or even their own kin.

All told, the government and its allies killed about 200,000 men, women, and children, more than four-fifths of them Mayan. One fourth of the victims were women. Depopulated villages were completely destroyed, their buildings torn or burned down, their wells poisoned. In the larger cities, death squads killed teachers, university professors, trade union leaders, politicians, and anyone else who questioned the killings or military rule. Most of the slayings, including the bulk of the massacres, occurred between 1981 and 1983.

That timing points to the role of the Reagan White House. Ronald Reagan took office in January 1981, and signaled a reversal of President Jimmy Carter’s emphasis on human rights in foreign policy. Carter had cut off U.S. aid to Guatemala in response to increasing human rights abuses. Reagan disapproved, arguing that such actions hurt our allies in the struggle against communism. U.N. envoy Jeanne Kirkpatrick articulated the Reagan doctrine that “authoritarian” governments were more palatable than “totalitarian” governments, and should not be destabilized by scruples over human rights. Latin American militaries had no trouble grasping the implications.
In Guatemala, repression was intensified. Then, in March 1982, General Efraín Ríos Montt seized power in a coup, and presided over the massacres in Mayan villages. In December 1982, President Reagan embraced Gen. Ríos Montt in Guatemala City, declaring that he was “getting a bum rap on human rights,” even though declassified CIA documents show that U.S. officials were aware of the massacres.

This embarrassing American connection is one reason the butchers of Guatemala remain untouchable while U.N.-supervised genocide trials are underway for similar atrocities in Rwanda and Bosnia. None of the officials who made the policies and gave the orders has yet been tried and convicted for the genocide in Guatemala.

On the contrary, it is their accusers who remain at risk. A year ago, assassins murdered Bishop Juan Gerardi two days after he presented a church report blaming the army for the mass killings of the 1980s. Ignoring evidence tying the bishop’s murder to the military, prosecutors first arrested a homeless man, then a priest. The priest was held for over half a year even though forensic experts concluded he could not have been the murderer.

President Alvaro Arzú has done nothing to pursue evidence that the killing was carried out on orders of military officers angered by the church report. It is unclear whether Arzú simply fears the military, or wants to maintain the official story that military abuses are a thing of the past. Either way, the effect is to perpetuate a climate of fear.

In this troubling context, President Clinton’s comments are an encouraging first step. But they don’t go far enough. Declassified CIA documents reveal that the intelligence office that prepared lists of names for Guatemalan death squads was set up with assistance from the State Department in the 1960s, and that the CIA was collaborating with the Guatemalan military at the time of the massacres in the early 1980s.

“We are determined to remember the past, but never repeat it,” President Clinton said in Guatemala City. The surest way to achieve that is through a U.N.-sponsored genocide tribunal.

Andrew Reding, Pacific News Service associate editor, directs the Americas Project of the World Policy Institute in New York.