

Guatemala: *Nunca Más*

by Carlos Martín Beristain



This second article¹ by Carlos Beristain presents the most significant findings of the REMHI Report, the experiences of the victims and issues relating to the process of reconstruction.

On 24 April 1998, the Report of the Project for the Reconstruction of Guatemala's Historical Memory was made public: Guatemala, *Nunca Más* (Guatemala, Never Again).

A. Report findings

During the last 36 years of armed conflict in Guatemala, human rights violations have affected a vast proportion of the population: refugees, internally displaced and those who stayed in their communities. The process of reconstructing the victims' experiences has been the single most important contribution of the REMHI Report.

Violence against families and individuals

Many families suffered multiple losses of family members: loss of a spouse (21%), of parents (22%), of children (12%) and of other members (21%). Furthermore, families suffered family harassment, hounding and later persecution, which often caused their break-up. Over a

longer timescale they have had to face family crises of an economic nature (poverty), social (an overloading of roles) and emotional (separation) which to a great extent have continued to today.

Today, most of the people who testified still show signs of the violence they have suffered. Sadness and a sense of injustice still persist, as do, to a lesser extent, health problems, loneliness and traumatic memories. These factors demonstrate the great need for providing the type of mental health support for the people and families affected which takes account of their experiences, and social measures to help mitigate the damage and promote justice.

Women appear to be the most affected by the loss of family members. More men than women were killed (90% of victims were men), depriving women of spouses; women exhibit greater economic difficulties, family conflicts, overloading and multiplication of roles; and they view the prospect of rebuilding their lives as impossible. There is also the

implication that the consequences of the war in terms of family responsibilities have fallen to a great extent on their shoulders. The information gathered specifically confirms the need for providing psychological and social support to widows.

A significant number (62%) of the massacres analysed included the killing of women, and survivors described sexual violations in one out of every seven massacres. In addition to the enormous personal and emotional overloading suffered by women, many have had to face up to changes not only in their daily lives but also in their social role. Many women confronted the violence in direct forms, opening up for question some of the stereotypes about the role of women in the family and society in the context of war. It was women, for example, who mobilised first to go in search of members of their family, to make the events public and to put pressure on the authorities.

Children also feature in most of the testimonies. Half the cases of massacres registered recounted the collective murder of boys and girls. The descriptions of the ways in which they were killed (burned alive, macheted to pieces and suffering severe head injuries) give an indication of the impact of the horror

Statistics from the REMHI Report

- **6,500 collective and individual interviews: 92% with victims and 8% with those responsible for the events. 61% of the testimonies were gathered in 15 Mayan languages.**
- **Direct victims of the war, approximately: 150,000 people killed; 50,000 missing; 1 million refugees; 200,000 children orphaned; 40,000 women widowed. Total: 1,440,000 victims.**
- **Of the 55,021 victims registered in the period 1960-96 (80% in the period 1980-83), 25,123 were killed (45.7%); 3,893 missing (7.1%); 5,516 tortured (10.0%); 723 held hostage (1.3%); 5,079 detained irregularly (9.2%); 152 victims of sexual violations (0.3%)² ; 10,157 victims of different types of attacks (18.5%); and 323 of other violations (0.6%).**
- **422 massacres were documented, of which 103 (24.4%) were in 1981 and 192 (45.5%) in 1982. 13% of the massacres involved between 11 and 20 victims, 27.5% between 21-100, and 9.5% more than 100 victims. 95% were the responsibility of the state's military and paramilitary forces. 3.7% of the massacres were attributed to the guerrillas.**
- **90% of the victims were men, 74.5% indigenous adults. Two out of three of the victims had family responsibilities. 86,813 children have ended up as indirect victims because their parents suffered some kind of violation; of these, 42,047 (48.7%) lost a mother or a father.**

which is still remembered today with great suffering. Among those who died when they were chased into the mountains (11% of the deaths), the majority were children who died from hunger or lack of shelter. Violations like these committed against young children constitute one of the characteristics of genocide pointed out in the report³.

Violence against communities and society

Political violence also affected the social and community fabric, especially in rural areas where the massacres had a very significant effect on the social structure of the indigenous communities, on power structures and on Mayan cultural relations in which the community represents an essential component of personal identity. Alongside the destruction, it was also very evident that there was a profound crisis at a community level with incidences of distrust and breakdown within indigenous communities. Religious practices, in both the Mayan and Catholic religion, had to change due to persecution and the loss of sacred sites and places for worship. The cultural changes which people described most were the loss of religious rites and festivals, the change in values, and loss of indigenous languages and dress: all strongly linked to Mayan identity.

Confronting the violence

Despite the dangers, many people and groups actively confronted the violence in different ways:

- Adaptation in the midst of violence**
Many people had to adapt to living for years in a military context and in doing so they employed: forms of self-preservation (such as not speaking), mutual support (such as solidarity channels), trying to do something to confront the events (for example, looking for family members) and religious forms of tackling the situation.
- Fleeing to save their lives**
The forced migrations gave rise to many forms of active defence: tackling the flight collectively and escaping to the mountains, where tens of thousands of people found temporary refuge⁴. There are two types of displacements, though many people's experience is made up of a combination of these:

- Collective and community displacements, generally for a long period of time in places that were not under control of the state, either in the form of exile or of creating an alternative life in the mountains.
- Displacement of families, moving to another community (in many cases, temporarily) and to the capital.

iii. Community defence

Community based vigilance, precaution taking and organisation were part of the life of the communities living in exile and in the mountains where a restructuring of daily life and local power relations took place, demonstrating an active, collective confrontation of the situation.

iv. Resistance in extreme situations

Many people suffered greatly as a consequence of being tortured or of living in the mountains, but they also showed an enormous capacity to face up to traumatic experiences. In confronting these extreme experiences, they drew from their own resources, relying on their own convictions and the support of others.

v. Attempting to change reality

Some testimonies refer to people's social and political commitment and to making a positive interpretation of what happened as a way of facing up to the violence. Despite the enormous de-mobilising effect of the political repression, there were people who organised themselves in groups as a result of having directly suffered violence. These organisational processes were initially as a response to practical problems, providing mutual support in face of the violence, but they also represented for many people a means of fighting against the causes of poverty and injustice.

B. Reconstruction and reparation

The Report includes an analysis of the process of rebuilding the social fabric where, despite the destruction, victims and survivors have been the ones playing a leading role. Years later, in most places, social organisations, traditional leaders and, to some extent, authorities have recovered their roles. Although this process is a slow one, it offers hope for the future.

Nevertheless, there are important factors in play at the moment which threaten this future, such as land problems⁵ aggravated by the numbers of returned refugees and displaced people, and the social problems of reintegrating the civil population with ex-combatants. In addition, the fact that the people responsible

ing social and psychological assistance for the victims and survivors. Nevertheless, the Report warns against projects and possible forms of reparation which might lead to new forms of social control or to legitimising the state, alerting people to the fact that the value of the support needs to be

Guatemala. It analyses the key role played by the Guatemalan intelligence services of military operations, massacres, extra-judicial executions, forced disappearances and torture. It is their officials who have been most linked to the systematic violation of human rights during the years of armed conflict, and the names of many of them appear in the Report. The training system employed by military bodies, based on forced recruitment, obedience training, strong group control and complicity in the atrocities, is also described in detail. This system explains to a great extent why the political repression took such a destructive form and why, given that a large part of this network is still intact today, it is currently manifesting itself in numerous ways during this post war period.

To make things bearable we have to bring them to light. That's the only way the wounds will be healed. We have suffered our history in our very flesh and we don't want such events to be repeated.

Case 0569. Cobán September/81

have enjoyed impunity, together with the education in violence which formed part and parcel of the system of forced recruitment and paramilitary activity, has led to the worsening of social violence. In the last year in Guatemala, there has been a lynching every ten days.

People are still afraid, particularly of having to live in the same community with those responsible for the violations (evident in one out of every three testimonies), of possible reprisals for testifying, and of increasing social conflict. In spite of the end of armed conflict, the consequences of the war continue to operate over a long period of time, threatening the chances of people being able to live together. This makes it essential to prioritise, on the post-war agenda, the ending of impunity and the confrontation of social problems such as the land question.

Mitigating the damage

The survivors' demands were brought together in the Report to express the hopes of the victims and the social changes necessary to follow on from the work of preparing a collective memory. In order of importance these demands include: respect for human rights, truth and justice; social changes as a basis for peace, including demilitarisation and social and economic changes; and making reparations and compensating the victims.

The different forms of 'reparation' relate to economic compensation and development projects, grants and study programmes, commemorations and monuments, and projects provid-

weighed up both in terms of its practical benefit and in terms of maintaining people's sense of dignity. Forms of reparation cannot be seen as a substitute for dealing with the demands for truth and justice. The REMHI Project has put forward numerous concrete recommendations relating to the survivors' demands, particularly to the state but also to the URNG (the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union) and the CEH (Commission for the Clarification of History).

Memory as a weapon against the horror

Lastly, the REMHI Report has revealed the mechanisms which made possible the extreme forms of cruelty of the violence in

The work of the REMHI Project makes it clear that, despite all the pain, keeping the memory of the atrocities alive plays a role in preventing future violence. Official statements are inclined to suggest that it is necessary 'to turn the page of history in order to rebuild society'. This is a deliberate distortion of memory, undermining society and

Nobel peace prize winner Rigoberta Menchú receives a copy of the REMHI Report at its launch in April 1998



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humiliating the victims anew. In Guatemala, as in many other countries, dismantling those mechanisms which made the horror possible is, to a large extent, a prerequisite for ensuring that the tragedy is not repeated.

An important, unexpected source of information for the REMHI Project was the testimonies (8% of the total) given by those responsible for, or involved in, the atrocities. The majority of these were members of the civil defence patrols (PAC). Compelled by guilt and a need to unburden themselves, many related how they had been forced by the army to participate in atrocities. Of those who were in the army, the majority spoke of the resentment they felt at having been used, and their subsequent psychological and family problems. Nevertheless, most of these seemed emotionally distanced from their reports and hardly acknowledged their direct involvement in the violence.

Giving back their memory

The work of the REMHI Project does not end with the presentation of the Report. Various teams, based on the network of 600 interviewers/animations who were involved in the gathering of testimonies, are currently working on popularising the report and 'giving people back their memory'. This work is being done via the preparation of educational material, radio programmes and workshops aimed at helping people to better understand what went on, to recognise their own experience, to respect the dignity of the victims and to strengthen their support for the reconstruction efforts.

In addition, the gathering of testimonies activated a demand for the disinterment of hundreds of clandestine cemeteries and for a land registry. Some of these disinterments are currently being carried out, with support for the families and assistance with legal issues. Local monuments and celebrations are being prepared in many cases. In the capital, the entrance columns of the cathedral have been covered with the names of the eighteen thousand known victims and the more than four hundred communities devastated.

Conclusions

The REMHI Project broke the silence and became a collective movement. It was successful, with its psychosocial approach, in gathering and presenting the effects of the violence, the resistance

of the people, and the thoughts and demands of the victims and survivors, and in offering numerous proposals and guidance for the work of social reconstruction.

Working through networks is important in order to achieve wide social involvement in such a project. However, REMHI had to confront different responses even in the church network which promoted it, which made the work more difficult in certain locations.

The measure in which the Report's recommendations - on impunity, investigation, social reforms, etc - can be executed will depend, to a great extent, on this memory being assimilated and used by different social and popular movements beyond REMHI. While the REMHI Project was underway, the government and the URNG negotiated the law of Reconciliation which threatens to become a new instrument of impunity. The assassination of Monsenor Girardi - the bishop most closely associated with the Project - made it clear that REMHI had overstepped the line drawn by those who negotiated the peace: it had named those responsible and had brought about a reconstruction of memory linked to social mobilisation.

Carlos Martín Beristain, a member of the REMHI project team, is a doctor specialising in mental health and in work with displaced populations in Guatemala and other Latin American countries. The REMHI Report has been elaborated in collaboration with other Guatemalan writers and organisations.

For a summary of the Report (in Spanish, English, French, German or Italian) and for information about educational materials used by the Project, contact: Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala, 6a calle 7-77 Zona 1, Guatemala City, Guatemala. Tel: +502 232 4604. Email: odhagua@pronet.net.gt Website: www.guateconnect.com/odhagua

1 Issue 2 of *Forced Migration Review* included an article by Carlos Beristain entitled 'The value of memory' which introduced the Project for the Reconstruction of Guatemala's Historical Memory (REMHI) and discussed the Project's methodology.

2 Stigma and shame caused by sexual violations habitually create an underestimation of the situation.

3 The REMHI Report suggested that some of the characteristics of genocide were present in the case of Guatemala, but the Project could not investigate whether deliberate intention existed. This aspect has been left pending the consideration of the official CEH

(Commission for the Clarification of History) which is preparing a report for the end of 1998.

4 Estimations about the number of people displaced in Guatemala: 1 million displaced within the country; 400,000 exiled in Mexico, Belize, Honduras, Costa Rica, the USA; 45,000 legal refugees in Mexico; 150,000 illegal refugees in Mexico and some 200,000 in the USA; 20,000 people organised themselves into CPRs (community resistance groups), another 20,000 were able to live as displaced people in the mountains for several years. See Fariás P (1994) *Central and South American Refugees*. In Marsella A J, Bornemann T, Ekblad S and Orley J (eds) *Amidst Peril and Pain: The Mental Health and Well-Being of the World's Refugees*, Washington, American Psychological Association.

5 In a country where 2% of the population own 70% of the cultivatable land, the war has aggravated the problems of access to and use of land, due to displacement of the population, the destruction of land registers, and the occupation of land by new communities better inclined towards the armed forces.

Successful Norwegian telethon for IDPs



Norwegian Refugee Council

Every year, for the last 25 years, the Norwegian people have collected money for various causes through a television fundraising drive (a 'telethon'). The Norwegian Refugee Council was the beneficiary of this year's telethon, and the collection has so far raised £9.5 million (115 million Norwegian kroner). The money will be used to help IDPs in the following ways:

- Former Yugoslavia and Kosovo: for centres for Bosnian entrepreneurs (offering advice, training and bank loans to establish enterprises); for legal aid, protection and housing; and for convoys of clothing to IDPs in Kosovo.
- Caucasus: for house building, water drilling, rebuilding of schools and health centres, education and human rights issues.
- Colombia: for protection, food distribution, house building, assistance for self-help activities, and legal aid.
- Central Africa: for housing, jobs, and educational opportunities for children.
- Sudan: for work in cooperation with other organisations.