



The Morning Line

Your Daily Dispatch
From the NewsHour
Politics Team

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Guatemala: Why We Cannot Turn Away

Tonight, Miles O'Brien reports from Guatemala on forensic science used to document charges of a genocide against thousands of indigenous Mayans in the 80s. From Boing Boing's Xení Jardin, who co-produced the piece, here's a look at their reporting.



José Ceto Cabo, an Ixil civil war survivor who runs a small NGO that aids fellow Ixil survivors, leads Miles and Xení to a clandestine grave from the civil war. Photo by Xení Jardin.

BY XENI JARDIN

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GUATEMALA CITY -- When the trial of Guatemalan General and former de facto head of state José Efraín Ríos Montt and his then chief of intelligence José Mauricio Rodríguez Sánchez began on March 19, 2013, I was in Washington D.C., working with NewsHour correspondent Miles O'Brien on some new science reporting projects in a shared office. The first time I went to Guatemala was around 1989, during the country's 36-year civil war -- I was a teenager, and the experience was one of the most important and formative of my life. My interest in the peace and justice process following the end of the armed conflict and the lives of the Guatemalan people, has only grown since. So I was happy to learn that Guatemalan independent online media groups were in the courtroom with laptops and modems, live-streaming video and audio of tribunal proceedings.

I tuned in as soon as court opened at 8:30 every morning, Guatemala time. And in our shared D.C. office, over a course of weeks, every day Miles and I worked while listening to audio streaming over the internet from that courtroom far away in Guatemala City. The background audio of our workdays included witness testimonies; defense lawyers yelling at the judges; and elderly Ixil Maya women weeping as they re-told the horrors of being raped, and watching their children, brothers, mothers, and grandfathers be killed.

Both of us were trying to do other work at the time, unrelated to this story. But neither of us could turn away, or turn off the audio, even as the stories grew more graphic, more upsetting, more awful with each witness. Imagine the worst possible thing one human being can do to another. Each testimony was like that, but each in a new and seemingly more horrific way than the last.

Miles O'Brien and Xení Jardin report on the role of science and forensics in the Ríos Montt genocide trial in Guatemala.

During one of my trips to Guatemala in the 2000's, I produced a **documentary series for National Public Radio** about the role science and technology played in some interesting stories related to peace and justice, and related to social and economic development for the country's majority population who are poor and indigenous. Some of the episodes focused on entities such as the **Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation** (FAFG) and the Project for the Recuperation of the Historic Archives of Guatemala's National Police (AHPN) -- groups that have produced forensic and documentary evidence that became central to the 2013 Ríos Montt genocide tribunal.

Miles and I listened to those 2007 NPR reports together during a long car ride after the genocide trial began. And after we'd listened to the last one together, we agreed that revisiting those projects, those people, and the question of what role science plays in this process -- that all of this would make a really great NewsHour story. And luckily for us, NewsHour agreed.

Within a few days, we were off to New York and Connecticut to interview anthropologist **Victoria Sanford**, mapping expert Russell Schimmer, and filmmaker **Pamela Yates**, who famously interviewed Ríos Montt in 1982. That interview was introduced as evidence in the trial, and the General himself watched silently as the video played in the courtroom.

Boing Boing's Xeni Jardin, who co-produced the NewsHour's broadcast report, updates Miles on the status of the genocide trial from a security checkpoint in Casillas, Guatemala.

Then, we flew to Guatemala City, to observe the trial, and interview people on both sides of the genocide debate. Miles spoke with Ríos Montt's daughter Zury Ríos Montt; and with his longtime advisor Harris Whitbeck -- who ran the regime's "Frijoles y Fusiles" (Beans and Bullets) aid program in the Guatemalan Highlands, and coordinated support with American Evangelical aid groups, including those led by popular television evangelists Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson.

Ríos Montt was trained at the U.S. Army's School of The Americas; the Guatemalan government and Army received funding, military training, weapons, and essential equipment such as helicopters directly from the U.S. (and through our allies: Israel and Taiwan, among others). President Ronald Reagan was a staunch ally of Ríos Montt, even as other lawmakers in Congress and the Senate raised concerns about reports of human rights abuses against indigenous populations. In arguing for more military aid for Guatemala, Reagan once famously said at a 1982 press conference in Honduras that the General had received "a bum rap" on human rights.



View a comprehensive archive of Jardin's coverage of the genocide trial for Boing Boing [here](#).

The question of who is responsible for atrocities that occurred during the Guatemalan civil war is not just a question for Guatemalans.

In Guatemala, we also interviewed people from organizations that produced criminal evidence for the trial, including AHPN and FAFG, and Patrick Ball from the Human Rights Data Analysis Group. Our interviews took place in an increasingly polarized climate in Guatemala; rumors were spreading that some trial witnesses and people involved in the prosecution were receiving threats. Some, we were told, were forced to leave the country out of concerns for safety. Paid 20-page inserts by a pro-Ríos Montt, anti-genocide-tribunal group appeared in each week's Sunday paper: "The so-called 'genocide' trial is a lie perpetrated by neo-Marxist guerrillas enabled by the Catholic Church," the headlines read.

But the most challenging part of our reporting trip came when we traveled to the Ixil area, to interview Mayan survivors, including a woman who appeared in the tribunal as one of the approximately 100 "querrelantes," or criminal witnesses. We spoke with José Ceto Cabo, an Ixil civil war survivor who runs a small NGO that works to aid fellow Ixil survivors, and we listened as seven Ixil men and women from Chajul, Cotzal, Nebaj, and other communities at the center of the

genocide trial told us the stories of the atrocities they survived. In the courtroom back in Guatemala City, women covered their faces with traditional woven shawls as a gesture of grief and to hide the overwhelming pain and fear they felt as they re-lived their trauma. In the room in Nebaj where our cameras and lights were set up, this group of men and women chose to show their faces, even as some of them wept and trembled, retelling horrors.

We followed one of these war survivors to her home in San Juan Cotzal. Doña Juana Sanchez Toma offered us coffee grown in a nearby field, cooked over a fire in her dirt-floor hut. Her cat curled up nearby, and a war widow named Doña Inez crushed coffee cherries on a stone metate just outside.

Miles asked Doña Juana if she had any photographs of her family that we might be able to film, to help tell the story. She stepped away, and returned with

a weathered, faded print: a smiling teenage girl, and an older woman with a sad, empty expression. The girl was a war orphan their family took in; the older woman was Doña Juana's mother, who was captured and raped not long after her daughter suffered the same.

"They tied her arms and legs and carried her like a dog, when they kidnapped her from our home," Doña Juana told us, weeping again. "They held her in the church, and the soldiers, all of them, they raped her for two weeks."

The photograph was taken after. She soon died, Doña Juana told us, after suffering incalculable physical and psychological trauma.

As we write this blog post, the trial is in its 25th day, after being suspended and restarting and re-suspending a number of times. One of Ríos Montt's attorneys, García Gudiel, has just screamed at Judge Yassmin Barrios, "I will not rest until you are in prison." I have been in Guatemala reporting on this story now for more than a month, and each day, it takes some new, unexpected, dramatic turn.

One week ago, President Otto Pérez Molina (a former General under Ríos Montt, who was implicated by one of the witnesses in the genocide trial) declared an "Estado de Sitio" (State of Siege) in four communities surrounding a U.S./Canadian-owned Escobal silver mine in San Rafael, just east of the capital. By various accounts, more than 8,000 Army and police troops have been sent in to the Siege zone.

I visited the area last Friday, and observed joint military/police checkpoints and interrogations, spoke to guards at the mine, observed sites where violence had taken place, and spoke to members of indigenous and community groups who say that the military occupation is a re-play of the repressive policies of the military during the 1980s.

Being in the "estado de sitio" area reminded me of passing through Army checkpoint zones during the war. Camionetas, those brightly colored school-buses, were pulled over by soldiers; all passengers ordered off, all identification checked, some questions asked. Back in the '80s, I was one of the bus passengers myself. And I remember observing that some people pulled off by soldiers were not allowed to get back on the bus.

Dozens of indigenous leaders held a dramatic demonstration inside the Guatemalan congress yesterday, as lawmakers met to consider ratifying (or not) the State of Siege. "Justice! Justice!" they shouted in unison, forcing their way into the congressional chamber, "No to militarization! We have suffered enough under the Army! Get out of our pueblos now!"

Miles has been called back to the U.S., and I must leave Guatemala soon, myself. But I don't want to. The story of these people continues to unfold, and I cannot turn away from it. When I return home, I will be tuned in, just like we were in the early days of the trial.

And I hope, we hope, and they -- many of the Guatemalan people -- hope that you will, too.

Esteban Castaño of Skylight Pictures, contributed to this report.

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David Philippart • 9 hours ago

As a US citizen, I am ashamed at the role that the US government played in this tragedy.

5 ^ | ▾ Reply Share ▾

John Sutton • 9 hours ago

Thank you for this broadcast. Our church in Arlington, VA has worked with NISGUA, a grassroots Guatemalan human rights organization, since 2006 by supporting U.S. citizens who to to Guatemala to walk with, to be with, to 'accompany' Mayan survivors as they seek justice from the State for the massacres it carried out. The Mayans have been at this unceasingly since 1996 in spite of unceasing threats and violence against them. The Rios Montt trial gives great hope. The trial is an embarrassment to the State.

4 ^ | ▾ Reply Share ▾

Reva Chandrasekaran • 18 hours ago

The PBS News Hour broadcast had subtitles for the Spanish portions.
Please add subs to the Youtube clips that you have on this page.

Thanks.

3 ^ | v Reply Share ›

Cliff Williams • 20 hours ago

While not justifying the actions of the US and its allies during the Cold War I often wonder why the abuses of the Left are never covered or discussed with the same condemnation. There is just as much blood in the hands of the soviets, Chinese, Cubans, etc.

1 ^ | 3 v Reply Share ›

Evan Ravitz → Cliff Williams • 3 hours ago

We can do something about US policy, unlike that of the Soviets, etc.

^ | v Reply Share ›

Louis • a day ago

I spent two weeks in Guatemala in January and visited previously in 1984. Thank you PBS.

2 ^ | v Reply Share ›

Guest • a day ago

Yes, the general is guilty...AND WITH THE AID OF THE U.S. Economically and politically. The U.S. gov. supported ANY latin american dictatorship as long they were against communism.

4 ^ | v Reply Share ›

stuart1648 • a day ago

guatemala and syria per cap gnp are about the same.

Syria fighting gets lots of media attention;guat got almost none

probably historical cultural bias

3 ^ | v Reply Share ›

Molly Molander • a day ago

Why would a responsible news organization like PBS still call this a "civil war"? In Guatemala it is now referred to as the 'conflicto armado'. Why? Because the United States trained and provided the military support for this conflict in the name of eliminating communism in this hemisphere. The CIA was responsible for torture there. A battalion of Israelis were brought in as mercenaries to torture and kill. Bill Clinton as President of the US had the decency to come to Guatemala in Air force One to apologize for US aggression during this period. Time to call a spade a spade. This was not a civil war.

16 ^ | v Reply Share ›

Skip Thomas • a day ago

Wilsonian diplomacy still lives. Here's a link to the National Security Archive website. They research and document primary source information relative to this subject.

<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/N...>

3 ^ | v Reply Share ›

Erik Kenggaard • a day ago

Read "Inevitable Revolutions - The United States in Central America" by Walter LA Feber. "a long and squalid history of US exploitation and intervention" (Arthur Schlesinger).

2 ^ | v Reply Share ›

Jud Lohmeyer • a day ago

How far will this trail really go? In the end it will indite a popular US President. The US will ultimately support a suspension of the trail to prevent the truth of American intervention and the consequences on local populations.

^ | 1 v Reply Share ›

Erik Kenggaard → Jud Lohmeyer • a day ago

@ Jud - that would be "indict," and that President was semi-popular as an actor. As governor, and later President, his performance was mixed.

4 ^ | 2 v Reply Share ›

Jud Lohmeyer → Erik Kenggaard • a day ago

Skip the vocab lesson...look up the word.. "to put down in words." That would be one of the outcomes of the trial.

1 ^ | 2 v Reply Share ›

James Snow • a day ago

How is it Americans/Canadians can even own the silver mine in Guatemala. Seems that country should retain the mineral rights to any mine. Seems the US influence to Latin countries usually means attempted dominance and theft of durable goods and

land.

6 ^ | v Reply Share ›

Erik Kenggaard → James Snow • a day ago

@ James - dominance and theft, for two hundred years. Spain was at it much longer.

2 ^ | 1 v Reply Share ›

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11 comments • 14 days ago



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1 comment • 21 days ago



JeanSC — In Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, I learned bit about the old ammo bunkers there. The roof & side walls are a smooth vaulted shape, made of concrete reinforced with flat ...

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