AAA Delegate to Trial in Guatemala Reaffirms Support of and Security for Anthropologists’ Work There

June Nash
The CUNY Graduate Center

On Oct 4, 2002, a former high-ranking Guatemalan military official was convicted of ordering the 1990 murder of Myrna Mack, an anthropologist investigating military atrocities. Her sister, Helen Mack, succeeded in bringing the case to trial because of Myrna Mack’s internationally respected reputation as an anthropologist. As co-founder of the Association for the Advance of Social Sciences in Guatemala (AVANCSO), Myrna Mack was carrying out the investigation of massacres at a time when few dared even to mention the deeds. The court judgment against one of the three officers charged marks the first conviction holding a military leader accountable for crimes committed during the country’s 36-year civil war.

The onset of the trial, and attendant news of an increase in threats and violence against Guatemalan intellectuals, academics and human rights activists prompted the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) to authorize a delegation of scholars to visit Guatemala from Sept 8-12, 2002. I participated as an official delegate of the American Anthropological Association. Patrick Ball represented the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Charles Hale, Beatriz Manz, Amy Ross and Carol Smith served as delegates from LASA. We were all in the courtroom when the most damning evidence against the convicted Colonel, Juan Valencia Osorio, was presented by a co-prisoner who had gained the confidence of a sergeant serving his sentence as the actual perpetrator of the vicious knifing attack on Myrna Mack.

The contest over the history of the war has not ended with the arrest and conviction of one of the three officers charged with the murder. Threats are still being made against forensic anthropologists who are trying to retrieve the history of the massacres from the exhumed remains of the victims, and against ethnologists and historians who are attempting to restore the historical memory of those who witnessed the massacres.

It was clear to both the Center for Forensic Anthropology (CAFCA) and to the Guatemalan Foundation for Forensic Anthropology (FAFG) that the threats have been tied to the information they are collecting from the sites of violence. Threats began in Feb 2002 when the forensic team first delivered their data to the Ministry of Justice. Shortly afterward, on March 21 the members of the Center team returned from a meeting to find the pastoral house where they stayed burned to the ground. The US embassy cooperated, and came out publicly against the attacks. The Guatemalan government was pressed to act but they could not promise security since people within the government were implicated as well.

When the trial of the murder of Myrna Mack began, both the Foundation and the Center for Forensic Anthropology received many more threats. On Sept 5 the forensic team received a letter containing abusive language and a warning that "We are not going to let your work get published" and that there might soon be a bomb. Shortly after they discovered the abused body of a member of their team, his eyes gouged out, his tongue wrenched from this throat and his ears ripped off. The forensic teams reported threats to the prosecutor immediately, and the authorities offered bodyguards. But when the forensic team suspected that they carried out a dual task of surveillance as well as protection that inhibited the cooperation of indigenous villagers, they dismissed them. Just by continuing with their work in the face of threats without guards, they felt that they gave symbolic evidence to the villagers that the work of bringing those guilty of the violence to justice is proceeding.
Despite growing concerns about their own safety, Guatemalans were organizing in defense of the investigators. We asked the director of the Foundation for Forensic Anthropology, José Suasnavar, whether our report would engender more threats and danger to the work of the FAFG. He replied, "It will put pressure on the state. We have to isolate the grupos parallelos (paramilitary or clandestine groups) with pressure. Whenever we publish something, other threats come in, but also information."

When we spoke with Clara Arenas at the offices of AVANCSO she recounted the threats and assaults endured by members of the research team as they carried out fieldwork in highland indigenous communities affected by the military terror in the 1980s. Matilda Gonzalez, who was working with a team of AVANCSO researchers eliciting memories of the terror, was followed and accosted in Jan 2002, and the research center was burglarized. When the police were notified, they sent a bodyguard, but when he went on vacation, there was no substitute. "We have to break the authoritarian culture," Clara Arena asserted. She and other members of the team see their task as that of informing society how the hegemonic base of the military and state operated at the grassroots, inculcating its authoritarian practices in village society through civilian patrols so as to disintegrate the social fabric. The very success of their work in analyzing the military tentacles in this social context appeared to be the reason for the mounting threats that rose in 2002.

Vice President Francisco Reyes embodied, in our interviews with him, the ambivalent role of the government as the trials of the military proceeded and the threats and assaults on the research investigators increase. On one hand, he had supported Helen Mack in her search for justice, yet he denied the power of his position in challenging the still existing clandestine forces. In response to our question about the threats to research workers, he stated that he could do nothing about the threats and violations of human rights because, in a democracy, the separation of powers does not allow the administrative branch to intervene in the justice department.

The delegation concluded from our trip that the alarming increase in threats and attacks coincident with the court conviction has not received sufficient attention from either the justice or the administrative and executive branches in the Guatemalan government. The creation of a Presidential Commission for Human Rights (COPREDE) indicates some progress, but the lack of financing to investigate and address violations in court indicates more a desire to conform to the dictates but not the spirit of human rights. The partial victory in convicting one of the three officers alleged in the murder of Myrna Mack was followed on Oct 8 by the annulment of the June 2001 sentence against three military officers and a priest for their involvement in the killing of Bishop Juan José Gerardi Considera. The vacillation in the Portillo presidency from his own avowed agenda of reinstating the legal base for social justice is amply illustrated by the power still exercised in his government by the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG). With the FRG leader, General Rios Montt, one of the leading perpetrators of the massacres in the 1980s when he was president, and others implicated with the years of terror and violence in his cabinet, President Portillo has not inspired confidence in his reconciliation program. As exemplified by the Vice President's response to our interrogation, the retreat from responsibility by appealing to the separation of powers is, in Charles Hale's felicitous title to our report "democracy as a subterfuge." Yet the evident desire on the part of many people who are risking their lives to ensure that justice is done indicates a strong commitment to restoration of democracy.

We urged the state to redouble forces to guarantee the security of the researchers and anthropologists, to reinforce its investigation of threats and intimidation against the researchers and to strengthen the judicial branch in its efforts. The delegation reaffirmed its support for the work of the investigators and
academics in social and forensic anthropology. We advised the press of our intention to send delegations regularly to witness the government's adherence to human rights accords.