

Commentary

Let the Bishop's Death Be Catalyst for Peace

■ **Guatemala:** Gerardi's murder must be resolved, quickly and satisfactorily, if the move toward reconciliation is to survive.

By DAVID HOLIDAY

GUATEMALA CITY—The brutal murder of Bishop Juan Jose Gerardi has come as a shock both to Guatemalans and the world. While the image of Guatemala as a violent and dangerous society might still prevail in international circles, those of us living here had nevertheless expected (and hoped) that such assassinations were a thing of the past.

Just 16 months ago, the signing of peace accords—officially ending Central America's longest running civil war—held out the promise of a brighter future. The accords set out an ambitious agenda for democratization and development that portended a qualitative and historic shift in relations between state and civil society. The accords were seen, in effect, as a call for national unity and reconciliation, but also implied a more rational and constructive process by which to get there.

Gerardi's death points to both the difficulty and precariousness of peace-building and reconciliation in postwar Guatemala. The long-awaited presentation last Friday of the church's Historical Memory Recovery project revealed in overwhelming detail the ongoing problem of military impunity and the destruction of indigenous communities as a result of the armed conflict. Yet Gerardi's murder shows just how

contested that history remains and just how far Guatemala has to go before real peace can be achieved.

Bishop Gerardi was not the most visible Catholic human rights advocate. But within the church hierarchy, he was perhaps the most senior clergyman associated with the institution's human rights policy. Having served in the late 1970s as the bishop of the politically volatile Quiche province, the violence of the early 1980s forced him to abandon the diocese. In the 1990s, he had directed oversight of both the archdiocese human rights office and the memory recovery project and often carried the church's human rights banner to international forums.

While only a thorough investigation will reveal whether the murder was criminally or politically motivated—for the moment, all indications point to the political—the immediate impact has been double-edged. A broad cross-section of Guatemalan society has come together to condemn and protest this killing in a rare display of national unity. Civil society leaders have encouraged Guatemalans to allow themselves to "feel the pain" but not be numbed into apathy and inaction.

Yet the wounds of Guatemala's violent history are still ever-present in the psychology and political culture of the average citizen. Communities and organizations throughout the country have in recent years been struggling in various ways to come to terms with the loss of friends and family members. Exhumations have been carried out in numerous villages in an attempt to identify victims, give them a proper burial and, at a minimum, remember

them with honor. The long-term impact of Gerardi's murder on these communities, especially if this case is not satisfactorily resolved, could be to quell further efforts to search for the truth.

Never before in the sad and tortured history of Guatemala has a bishop been slain, not even in the cruelest, darkest hours of the war. The message received by the vast majority of Guatemalans is a cautionary one: Speaking truth has its consequences. The average citizen, whether Indian or ladino, rich or poor, will have to continue thinking twice before raising their voice against injustice and abuse. Many Guatemalans will think: If a bishop can be killed and his perpetrators not found and punished, what protections from the state can I expect?

President Alvaro Arzu's government thus faces a formidable challenge in bringing the perpetrators to justice. Only this will help overcome the historic distrust of the Guatemalan population, who understandably have found little reason to have faith in the possibilities for justice.

Gerardi's dedication to human rights and historical truth-telling about the past were carried out only in the interests of reconciliation and justice, not revenge. We can only hope that, like other martyrs before him, his death will catalyze and strengthen that commitment and open the path to a more peaceful Guatemala.

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