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EDITORIALS

RECKONING IN GUATEMALA

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The recent release of the report of the Historical Clarification Commission in Guatemala has injected new energy into a process that has been faltering since the signing of the December 1996 peace accords. The commission's basic finding--that the military was responsible for 93 percent of the human rights violations and other acts of violence documented--was not unexpected. But the charges of genocide and racism committed by the armed forces in their ruthless campaign against the guerrillas in the early eighties, in which hundreds of Mayan communities were wiped out, came as a surprise, issued as they were by a United Nations-sponsored effort. The Guatemalan government and URNG rebels had agreed that this commission would produce a historic document that would not fix individual responsibility (as did the Truth Commission in neighboring El Salvador) nor have any legal consequences.

At the time, in 1994, this agreement was denounced by human rights groups as toothless. For the political supporters of the rebels, it was tantamount to surrender, and resulted in the URNG temporarily taking a harder line in the negotiations. The commission recommended reparations for war victims and reform of the judicial system and security apparatus, and it proposed that Congress create a foundation--with government and civil society participation--to monitor the implementation of these recommendations. Civil society organizations can thus continue pushing for reforms that in many ways will deepen the content of the peace process. Human rights groups also plan to bring court cases against those accused of torture, forced disappearances and genocide, the prosecution of which is still permitted by the 1996 amnesty law. The commission's 3,500-page report should provide ample material for those efforts.

The long-term impact of the report, however, will depend on reactions in the government. President Alvaro Arzu has reserved comment until his advisers have studied the document, but no measures are likely to be taken without the full support of the military. The commission's proposal for an independent commission to oversee the purging of officers involved in the wartime atrocities could be a way out for the civilian government, but even that would be a bitter pill for the military, which considers itself victorious and completely justified in its actions.

The United States has a role to play in any follow-up to the report. In recent years Washington has gone to great lengths to repair its image in Guatemala, becoming one of the principal donors to the peace process--even funding human rights advocates and other civil society organizations and contributing to a fund for reparations. It also contributed to this truth-seeking exercise by providing newly declassified documents to the commission, in contrast to refusals by Israel, Taiwan and Argentina.

Washington should not have been surprised, however, when criticism of its actions in support of the military drew especially large cheers from the thousands of victims and activists gathered for the report's release. To this day, official US discourse all but ignores the role of the CIA and other US agencies in organizing and supporting the repressive state apparatus throughout the conflict.

If Washington hopes for eventual reconciliation with the Guatemalan victims of past policies, money alone will not suffice. An explicit acknowledgment of US responsibility for the Guatemalan tragedy by President Clinton during his post-Hurricane Mitch tour of Central America would be a first step toward such a healing. No less was provided by the commission's report, and no less should be expected of the United States.