

## Latin America's Archives of Terror

By Laura Carlsen | October 20, 2003

In 1974 Celestina Pérez de Almada died of a heart attack after spending day after day listening to the screams of her husband being tortured. This brutal soundtrack came to her courtesy of the torturers themselves—a “2 for the price of 1” form of torture favored by Alfredo Stroessner during his 35-year dictatorship.

Her husband, Martin Almada, was among the lucky few who escaped the horror with his life, and a dogged commitment to bring the criminals of Latin America's dirty war to justice. In 1992 he brought to light massive archives that document Paraguay's role in the U.S.-sponsored Operation Condor, a regional network of repression against opposition to the military dictatorships in the Southern Cone. The documents led to the recent embargo on \$85,000 of Stroessner's assets—estimated at \$500 million—and were also used to build the international case against Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet. These reams of papers are not for the weak-stomached. Paraguayans call them “The Archives of Terror.”

Paraguay isn't the only country to have Archives of Terror. Families of victims and human rights groups all over Latin America have been patiently reconstructing the buried histories of terror. Many are finally making some headway in discovering and even prosecuting crimes. In Guatemala, they have filed a genocide case against former dictators Romeo Lucas Garcia and Efraín Ríos Montt, stemming from massacres in over four hundred Mayan villages. In Argentina, President Kirchner cleared the way for a congressional annulment of impunity laws and has challenged them in the courts. New documents have been released on the student massacre in Tlatelolco in Mexico 1968, fueling demands to investigate and prosecute government officials involved. On a recent ill-advised training tour, the Chilean sailing vessel dubbed “the White Lady” that was used as a floating torture chamber under the Pinochet regime has been met with protests at ports throughout the world and renewed demands to investigate its sordid history.

While all this may seem like shadows from a darker era, it's not as far behind us as one might suppose. The past acts of terror do not live on only in the tormented memories of the victims and their families. Many of the

archives of terror contain open cases, with new cases entering almost daily. Human rights abuses abound in the hemisphere. Assassination of human rights workers in Mexico continues (the latest: Griselda Teresa Tirado, an indigenous Totonaco human rights worker) and in Guatemala and Colombia attacks on journalists and opposition leaders are on the rise. Moreover, many criminals not only operate with impunity but retain considerable economic and political power, overtly or covertly, within their countries. Guatemala's genocidal dictator Ríos Montt is now president of the Congress and a presidential candidate.

Opposed to the Truth Commissions and investigations, there will always be those who argue to let bygones be bygones—in the name of unity, stability, or other thinly veiled defenses of impunity. This is a fatal position. Future justice can never be built on past impunity. Moreover, there is nothing “bygone” about Ríos Montt, Stroessner, and Pinochet, as long as they remain at large for their crimes. And with over 70 Bolivians killed in the streets last week, no-one can argue that violent repression has become a thing of the past in Latin America.

As Latin Americans seek to come to terms with the most painful and ugly parts of their nations' past, the United States must do the same. Researchers combing through the horrors find that the names of U.S. officials keep cropping up in key places and moments. U.S. government archives contain important information that could put hated criminals behind bars and help close the open wounds of families of the disappeared. They should be released.

It will take a willingness to confront responsibilities. In Guatemala, the string of genocidal dictators began with the U.S.-abetted, cold war coup to overthrow democratically elected Jacobo Arbenz in 1954. U.S. congressional hearings have documented the U.S. government's role in



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the Chilean coup d'état that brought Pinochet to power. Operation Condor was funded and orchestrated in large part by the U.S. government and owes its intellectual underpinnings to Henry Kissinger, the epitome of cunning and heartless foreign policy.

While the past may seem a Pandora's Box for those who defend the status quo, citizens groups throughout the hemisphere are seeking justice as the only foundation for building stronger, more democratic societies. U.S. citizens and government officials should support them. Ongoing trials of international murderers and torturers, investigations of the scorched earth campaigns against indigenous peoples, and prosecution of Stroessner and Pinochet, to say nothing of the Argentine government's attempts to end impunity all have implications not only in their countries but throughout the hemisphere.

Sadly, history shows we've been on the side of the bad guys in Latin America time and time again. Isn't it time we weighed in on the side of the good guys?

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