

# Partner in terror

From the Editors in the [March 24, 1999](#) issue

For over three decades military regimes in Guatemala conducted a terrorist campaign against their own people. In a 36-year battle against guerrilla forces, which finally ended with a peace agreement in 1996, the Guatemala military kidnapped, tortured and summarily executed those it regarded as enemies. An independent truth commission reported last month that more than 600 massacres were committed during the long civil war and that government-controlled forces were responsible for more than three-quarters of those atrocities.

Throughout much of this era, the U.S. supported the Guatemala military with advice and money. It provided \$33 million in military aid in the 1960s and '70s. President Jimmy Carter cut off military aid in 1977, citing human rights abuses, but aid was resumed in 1982 under Ronald Reagan and continued until 1990. Though not a direct participant in the government's brutal counterinsurgency campaign, the U.S. was a knowing partner.

Just how knowing became evident with the release this month of classified CIA and State Department documents, made public by the National Security Archive, a nonprofit group. In 1966, for example, the CIA station reported that the Guatemala military was secretly executing "communists and terrorists." In 1968, diplomat Viron Vaky complained in a memorandum to the State Department that the U.S. was condoning Guatemala's indiscriminate counterterrorism and taking the attitude that "murder, torture and mutilation are all right if our side is doing it and the victims are communists."

In light of these revelations and the work of the truth commission, President Clinton was compelled to make some acknowledgment of U.S. complicity in Guatemala's bleak history when he visited Guatemala City on March 10. As apologies go, his was both limited and general. He said it was "wrong" and a "mistake" for the U.S. to have supported "military forces or intelligence units which engaged in violent and widespread repression." No mention was made of specific deeds, or of the 1954 CIA-backed coup which replaced an elected president with a military government and

set the stage for Guatemala's long and brutal civil war.

Nevertheless, Clinton's apology is much needed. Along with the release of documents, the apology opens the way to reconciliation between the U.S. and Guatemala. It should also open the way to new level of honesty about U.S. policy not just in Guatemala but throughout Latin America.