

Ríos Montt's Trial: Former US-Backed Guatemalan Dictator's War "Without Limits" - Militarization, Social Control, Indoctrination and Massacres

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Washington, D.C., May 9, 2013 – After weeks of powerful testimony and excruciating procedural wrangling, the trial of former Guatemalan dictator Efraín Ríos Montt and his intelligence chief José Rodríguez Sánchez on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity is coming to an end. With Judge Yazmin Barrios's request for closing arguments yesterday, the government's lead prosecutor, Orlando López, gave more than two hours of summation based heavily on the Guatemalan military plans, manuals, and operational records entered as evidence. With this posting, the National Security Archive looks at the army's strategy behind the counterinsurgency campaign launched by Ríos Montt against the guerrillas and the civilian population suspected of supporting them.

For background on the trial and daily summaries of the proceedings, commentary, analysis, documents and photographs, see the Open Society Justice Initiative website, created in partnership with the National Security Archive, the International Center for Transitional Justice, CEJIL and the Guatemalan on-line news site [Plaza Pública](#).

See also PBS Newshour's "[Guatemala: Why We Cannot Turn Away](#)."

For part one of this special report on Ríos Montt, see [Indicted for Genocide: Guatemala's Efraín Ríos Montt](#).

Next Posting: U.S. Policy and the Ríos Montt Regime.

Controlling the counterinsurgency: Plan de campaña "Victoria 82"

Ríos Montt's decision to purge and reorganize the military prepared the armed forces for what would become the most intensive phase of the counterinsurgency in the conflict's twenty-year history. The army's strategists began to plan the scorched earth operations that would decimate the Mayan regions of the country in the months to come. A U.S. defense attaché report informed Washington in April that "The army intended to act with two sets of rules, one to protect and respect the rights of average citizens who lived in secure areas (mostly in the cities) and had nothing to do with subversion. The second set of rules would be applied to the areas where subversion was prevalent. In these areas ('war zones') the rules of unconventional warfare would apply. ... Guerrillas would be destroyed by fire and their infrastructure eradicated by social welfare programs." [[Document 1](#)]

The army's determination to wage total war was driven not simply by military imperatives,

but by deep political concerns as well. Lucas García's regime had put the military on warning about the potential political power of the indigenous population. The perceived success of the guerrillas (particularly the Guerrilla Army of the Poor — the EGP — operating in the northwest of the country) in appealing to the Mayan population on the basis of the State's record of violence and neglect in those communities alerted the armed forces to the dangers of ignoring the country's indigenous poor. The nation would now be guided by the armed forces toward a "controlled" democratic transition without constitutional constraints.

In a report dated May 23, 1983, the CIA pointed out that "The insurgency has already forced the military, the strongest institution in Guatemala, to acknowledge that long-ignored sections of the country like the Western Highlands are exploitable political power bases." [Document 2] Ríos Montt characterized the same problem in an interview with political analyst Jennifer Schirmer. "Listen well: subversion or the guerrilla is not a military problem. It is eminently a political problem. And, as a consequence, every State apparatus must act where there exists a political vacuum. Knowing that, we addressed the entire problem in 1982: justice, beans and bullets." [1]

That same month, the US Embassy declared that the Junta "has announced a pacification campaign based on the two F's, 'Fusiles and Frijoles (Rifles and Beans).' It has announced instructions to the security forces to 'protect campesinos, not repress them.' It has arranged mass demonstrations of civilian militiamen in the war torn 'Ixil Triangle' of Quiché, and provides food and medical aid to Quiché refugees... The Junta has clearly embarked on a campaign to win the hearts and minds of the campesinos, and probably to improve the GOG's international image." [Document 3]

"One of the first things we did was to draw up a document for the campaign with annexes and appendixes. It was a complete job with planning down to the last detail," Col. Héctor Gramajo Morales — an architect of Ríos Montt's pacification campaign — told analyst Jennifer Schirmer in an interview.[2] Gramajo was referring to Plan de Campaña "Victoria 82."

The idea behind the creation of Victoria 82 — issued on June 16, 1982 — was the imposition of a systematic and controlled strategy on a counterinsurgency campaign that had been characterized under former President Romeo Lucas García by indiscriminate and chaotic violence. The military officers who launched Victoria 82 recognized the failure of the previous regime, the antipathy that it created within the population against the State, and the corresponding increase of support for the insurgents. For that reason, Ríos Montt and his army designed a plan that sought the total elimination of the armed subversion, as well as the "parallel organizations," combined with economic and social development programs to change the mentality (or "win the hearts and minds") of society toward the State. "The population's mentality is the principal objective," according to Victoria 82.[3]

This new plan, created by the army to "guarantee the Nation's peace and security," established a mission for all military units in the country: "The commands involved will conduct operations of security, development, countersubversive and ideological warfare in their respective areas of responsibility... with the objective to locate, capture or destroy subversive groups or elements [individuals]." (IV) The document identified psychological and counterinsurgency operations as twin strategies necessary for achieving victory over communism in the country. Accordingly, Ríos Montt's new plan combined the tactics of Benedicto Lucas with social welfare programs in an effort to mitigate the brutal counterinsurgency sweeps with government assistance.

Victoria 82 sought first and foremost to destroy the guerrilla forces and their base through operations of annihilation and the scorched earth tactics. As stated in the plan's "Purpose" (II/A/1-3), the army's job was to:

1. Defend the population
2. Recover members of the Irregular Local Forces (Fuerzas Irregulares Locales-FIL) when possible while eliminating subversives who refuse to lay down their weapons
3. Annihilate the Clandestine Local Committees (Comités Clandestinos Locales-CCL) and the Permanent Military Units (Unidades Militares Permanentes-UMP) of the enemy

Although the plan distinguished between the army's objectives regarding the FIL and the CCL, both groups were local unarmed campesinos living and working in the targeted areas of operation. The FIL were civilians whose routine labors continued — tending their crops in the field or their domestic responsibilities — while they contributed to self-defense actions to hinder the Army's activities. The CCL were local leaders, often communitarian authorities, who served as political representatives for the guerrilla. As the CEH points out in its report, "The physical elimination of these leaders was a priority for the Army because it signified the end of the political connection between the guerrilla units and their bases of social support." [4]

Despite the distinctions of Victoria 82, it is clear from the plan that the armed forces regarded the indigenous communities as fatally intertwined with the insurgency. In order to eradicate the base, Victoria 82 promoted a scorched earth strategy, ordering the destruction of homes, local crops, animals and other potential sources of guerrilla supplies. "In addition to trying to destroy the subversive groups completely, their collective farming enterprises must be destroyed, once they are identified or when they are in areas where their encampments are suspected to exist, with the aim of cutting them off from their supply source and forcing them to surrender out of hunger or to be discovered through their movements in the areas they frequent and in that way be able to combat them..." (Instrucciones de Coordinación, 18) The Communities of Population in Resistance - groups of unarmed indigenous who had fled their homes en masse and were on the run from the army in the mountain - were also considered a target for annihilation by the armed forces, and were hunted down through search and destroy missions or extensive bombing campaigns. One of the responsibilities of the army's intelligence services was to "Determine the concentrated areas of the population, mobilized by subversion (refugee sympathizers)." (Anexo B, Inteligencia, II/A/5)

Parallel to the counterinsurgency operations set into motion by Victoria 82 were the psychological operations and civic actions programs, ostensibly intended to rescue the indigenous communities from the guerrilla forces and provide them with the economic support they needed to thrive. The plan mandated a broad strategy of welfare programs, "prioritizing important reforms of a social and economic nature in the areas affected by the state of violence where the enemy has developed an effective program of consciousness raising, and which will give preferential treatment to infrastructure projects in the areas of health, education, agriculture and housing, as well as ideological preparation for incorporation of the different affected ethnicities into society..." (Anexo F, Plan de OPSIC, III/A/3/a/1)

The social programs were provided within the context of militarized communities created by

the State for civilians displaced by the conflict, under the strict surveillance of the army and civil patrols. Victoria 82 ordered all commands to “Carry out operations of control of the population and its resources ...” (Anexo G, Asuntos Civiles, III/C/5). In practice, such operations ensured total control over a region considered suspect and ideologically vulnerable, and comprised a wide range of activities including – as described by the CEH – “registration posts on the highways and in urban centers, population censuses, curfews, inspections of individual documents and issuance of passes, search operations, capture of guerrilla sympathizers. In addition, political meetings were prohibited and control exercised over the water supply in rural areas, over munitions, explosives, medicine and money, over the production, storage and distribution of food.”[5]

In sum, Plan Victoria 82 described the creation of a State purged of subversive elements by a war “without limits,” in the words of the new Chief of State Efraín Ríos Montt, and then totally militarized through an extensive infrastructure of social control, indoctrination and repression. The army commanders throughout the country were ordered to hurry their preparations for the offensives that would follow immediately after the end of the amnesty.

Military Mobilization

As the regime launched the wider war, the army increased and reorganized for the campaign. The Military Junta had made explicit reference to the army’s inability to eliminate the guerrillas definitively in its [National Plan for Security and Development](#) (PNSD): “In the Military Field, the troops, weapons, and equipment of the Guatemalan Army, according to the current organization, are not adequate to cover the different fronts presented by armed subversion.” (I/b/5, p. 1) Victoria 82 was designed to address these inadequacies. The document contained detailed orders on how restructure, strengthen and coordinate the military’s forces in order to “defend the population” and “annihilate” the guerrillas. Emphasis was placed on the mobility of the units involved (“they must be in constant movement” IX/G), the imperative of communication (“they must maintain CONSTANT COORDINATION BETWEEN THEM” IX/E), and the responsibility of the individual commanders to report directly to the Army General Staff every 15 days on the status of their forces, combat actions taken, and a summary of results (IX/Q).

In order to prosecute the war, Ríos Montt’s regime amplified the task force strategy established under Benedicto Lucas García. The temporary task forces gave the army the utmost flexibility in assembling special rapid reaction forces composed of units drawn from services, military zones, bases and brigades from all over the country and concentrating them in closely defined zones of operation for a limited period. Victoria 82 mandated the creation of several new task forces: Task Force Gumarcaj was assigned to the central Ixil region, Quiché, and Task Force Tigre to the Ixcán. Iximché continued operations in Chimaltenango and a fourth Task Force, Quiriguá, covered an area of operations in San Marcos and part of Quetzaltenango. (VI/A/19, 20, 21, VIII/P, Q, R and Anexo K) According to the Historical Clarification Commission, the new Task Forces began operating in June 1982, as ordered by the Victoria 82.[6]

The government’s plans to expand the armed forces caused an acute shortage of junior officers in the field, so the Army took several steps, according to the declassified US documents: it approved an increase in the size of incoming cadet classes in the Military Academy, created two new courses to graduate officers (a 10-month reserve officer course at the Center for Military Studies and a small unit leaders course for sergeants major), and began exploring the possibility of including women as cadets. [[Document 4](#)] The regime also

recalled to active duty former military personnel to take part in the campaign. [\[Document 5\]](#) In order to strengthen some of the more active and undermanned units, the Army added five reserve companies in July and Huehuetenango added eight companies. During the state of siege, commanders of both permanent and temporary units controlled paramilitary security forces and civic action personnel in their areas. [\[Document 2\]](#)

On July 30, the DIA reported that Army Staff G-3 planners were preparing to add 5 companies to the Poptún military base in the Petén in order to prepare for a possible influx of EGP guerrillas into the region from Mexico, where they would likely flee as Victoria 82 intensified. In order to prevent EGP flow over border in the north — where they could seek support from the FAR before heading back to the highlands — the increased military forces at Poptún and support from Sta. Elena Air Base would permit search and destroy missions, patrol of suspected entry points and an increase of ambushes of guerrilla units. [\[Document 6\]](#)

In the first week of July, shortly after the state of siege began, President Ríos Montt held a meeting with all senior unit commanders to motivate them to make Plan Victoria a success. “He emphasized the fact that the plan was made very general to permit each commander as much freedom of action as possible in his assigned area. BG Ríos said he was leaving the details up to them, and he expected results. Civilians and their properties were to be respected. He wanted each commander to take special care that innocent individuals would not be killed; however, if such unfortunate acts did take place, he did not want to read about them in the newspapers. He concluded by stating that the next six months could very well be a turning point for the country, politically, economically and especially militarily. Each commander must now assume his share of the burden to ensure success at the end of this period.” [\[Document 6\]](#)

As the US Embassy described the strategy months after its inception, “The military moved in force into Huehuetenango and El Quiché, with the now well-known ‘Beans and Rifles’ program, providing the non-combatant population with a rather heavy-handed but clear cut alternative to the guerrillas.” [\[Document 7\]](#) In order to improve its control over the highlands, the government began constructing a network of refugee camps and strategic villages. “The rural populace is ordered to move to villages where the army has outposts. A scorched earth policy is then applied to the surrounding area.” The tactics were complemented by civic action programs called the “Plan of Assistance to Areas of Conflict” (PAAC) and “Housing, Food and Work.” By early 1983, according to the US Embassy, the military had “pacified large areas of El Quiché, Chimaltenango, the Verapaces and Huehuetenango.”

Plan Victoria 82 provided the strategic framework for the scorched earth operations and civic actions programs carried out during the first year of the Ríos Montt government. The Army’s expansion, reorganization and deployment of its units after March 23 enabled the regime to mobilize its troops anywhere there was a perceived threat in the country and apply massive force rapidly and effectively.

Army massacres in declassified US documents



Ríos Montt’s scorched earth tactics are documented in a collection of Guatemalan army records created in July and August 1982, connected to Operation Sofía — a series of

counterinsurgency sweeps through the Ixil region to kill EGP combatants and destroy their “base of support” (the Maya Ixil population). The Operation Sofía documents were given to the National Security Archive in 2009 and the Archive in turn provided them as criminal evidence to the prosecutors in the genocide case. You can read about [Operation Sofía here](#).

Declassified US documents have been less useful to the case. Biased reporting renders many of the US documents a poor source of credible information on the massacres during the Ríos Montt regime, in particular in the Ixil region that is the subject of the genocide trial. There are exceptions, however – documents that contain evidence of army responsibility for human rights crimes under Ríos Montt’s leadership. They are exceptions because of the access that US officials had at the time of the incidents to intelligence information from credible, non-military sources.

One example of US records pointing to army perpetrators in massacres and other human rights abuses concerns the violence that occurred in and around Choatalum, Chimaltenango in October 1982. US reporting on Choatalum initially reflected the same skepticism that colored many of their observations about massacres under Ríos Montt. The US Embassy strongly discounted early reports from human rights groups and news articles alleging an army massacre of campesinos in Choatalum in October, and the arrival of huge numbers of refugees trying to flee the army in surrounding areas.

In one communication sent to Washington on October 28, for example, US Ambassador Chapin noted the leftist political views of two of the journalists reporting the story and pointed to their ties to Cuba and Nicaragua. “The Embassy will continue to seek firsthand information about Choatalum but remains convinced that a massacre did not happen in Choatalum on October 5 nor were the refugees who had gathered there threatened by the army,” wrote Ambassador Chapin. “The story is considered by every observer we have consulted to be a deliberate fabrication and one that should not be permitted to serve the Marxist cause.” [[Document 8](#)]

Less than two weeks later, the Embassy sharply reversed its position, when a trusted source told political officers what he had seen, and later brought indigenous survivors to tell their stories personally. The extraordinary cable that resulted from the meetings is worth quoting at length for what it says about the level of military violence unfolding in the Altiplano at the time.

The source, “who has lived in the San Martín Jilotepeque area off and on for six years,” stated that “the incidents that led to thousands of Indians being taken to Choatalum were not the result of battles between the army and the guerrillas which allowed the Indians to escape the guerrillas. On the contrary, the source said that late September he witnessed an army sweep through Choatalum and that thousands of Indians were fleeing the army, not the guerrillas. During this sweep, the army allegedly massacred many Indians. ...”

The source brought four men and a young girl to speak with one Embassy officer about their experiences in the nearby village of La Estancia. “The group from La Estancia was too frightened to come to the Embassy. Emboff [Embassy officer] and source met them at a nearby church and all went to an Emboff’s apartment in order to speak privately. They first stated that the general climate in La Estancia and Choatalum was one of unending fear and uncertainty.”

The men described one early massacre in March 1982 and the constant army harassment

that followed. "On July 25, the army returned to La Estancia and picked four men out of the assembled civil defense patrol; the men were never seen again. On September 12, three other villagers were picked up in the market at San Martín Jilotepeque; they were never seen again. On October 19, a young man was caught walking alone in the village; he saw an army patrol and fled. He was shot to death while running away and his head was then ripped open with machetes. His family was too frightened to claim the body..."

The source also brought a young girl, about 7 years of age. "She was an orphan, found wandering in the vicinity of La Estancia on October 1. ... The young girl told Emboff that on September 30 she and a group of women and children were hiding from the army in the countryside of Chimaltenango. A baby cried out from the bushes they were hiding in and they were discovered by the army. The soldiers, she said, tossed grenades into their hiding spot, killing many people instantly. The young girl was wounded in the wrist, her mother was too hurt to get up and run. A soldier came by and robbed the mother of money and jewelry. A short while later another soldier returned and ordered the mother to rise; she was unable to do so. The soldier then shot her to death. This same soldier apparently noticed the young girl; he kicked her in the head, leaving her stunned and perhaps thinking her dead. Emboff noticed her healed head bruises; her wrist was yet wrapped with a rather old and yet bloodied bandage. The young girl spoke freely after listening to Emboff talk with the villagers for an hour or so. Although she was able to relate her story coherently, she still spoke of her mother in the present tense. She could not remember where her family was from and Emboff did not press her for details."

The reporting officer described the eyewitnesses as highly credible. "Also, both Emboffs who debriefed original source have a high degree of confidence in his statements." The men told the reporting officer they did not know what to do. "They claim the army in Chimaltenango will still go into villages 'not at peace with the army' and kill unarmed men, women and children. This is the reason, they said, why so many people were displaced in the Choatalum area in late September and early October; they were all fleeing the army."

The reporting officer concluded by observing that the information "points to a disturbing trend of selective terror against 'red' villages by some GOG [Government of Guatemala] security forces." [[Document 9](#)]

THE DOCUMENTS

[Document 1](#): DIA, Views of a Coup Leader, April 7, 1982.

[Document 2](#): CIA, Guatemala-Restructuring the Military, May 23, 1983

[Document 3](#): EMB, Guerrilla Activities Increase, April 30, 1982

[Document 4](#): DIA, Escuela Militar increases number cadets, July 20, 1982

[Document 5](#): INR, Human rights in Guatemala, August 13, 1982

[Document 6](#): DIA, Additional Information on Operations 'Plan Victoria 82', July 30, 1982

[Document 7](#): EMB, Analysis of Rios Govt After 11 Months, February 18, 1983

[Document 8](#): EMB, More on Choatalum, October 28, 1982

[Document 9](#): EMB, Red, pink, white villages Chimaltenango, November 10, 1982

NOTES

[1] Schirmer, Jennifer. The Guatemalan Military Project: A Violence Called Democracy Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998, p. 35.

[2] Ibid , p. 44.

[3] Plan de campaña Victoria 82 , Anexo "H" (Ordenes Permanentes para el Desarrollo de Operaciones Contrasubversivas), I. Although Victoria 82 is not a public document, the National Security Archives possesses a copy and will post it as soon as it becomes public with the end of the Ríos Montt trial.

[4] CEH, Capítulo II, Volumen 1, Las Estrategias Contrainsurgentes Durante el Conflicto Armado, parr. 21-22

[5] CEH, Capítulo II, Volumen 1, Las Estrategias Contrainsurgentes Durante el Conflicto Armado, párr. 38

[6] CEH, Chapter II, Vol. 1, sections 101-110

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