



# Genocide in Guatemala 1981–1983

Guatemala is a mainly mountainous country in Central America. It was once at the heart of the remarkable Mayan civilization, which flourished until the 10th century AD. When Spanish explorers conquered this region in the 16th century, the Mayans became slaves in their own homeland. They are still the underprivileged majority of Guatemala's population.

Civil war existed in Guatemala since the early 1960s due to inequalities existing in the economic and political life. In the 1970s, the Maya began participating in protests against the repressive government, demanding greater equality and inclusion of the Mayan language and culture. In 1980, the Guatemalan army instituted "Operation Sophia," which aimed at ending insurgent guerrilla warfare by destroying the civilian base in which they hid. This program specifically targeted the Mayan population, who were believed to be supporting the guerilla movement. Over the next three years, the army destroyed 626 villages, killed or "disappeared" more than 200,000 people and displaced an additional 1.5 million, while more than 150,000 were driven to seek refuge in Mexico. Forced disappearance policies included secretly arresting or abducting people, who were often killed and buried in unmarked graves. In addition, the government instituted a scorched earth policy, destroying and burning buildings and crops, slaughtering livestock, fouling water supplies and violating sacred places and cultural symbols. Many of these actions were undertaken by the army, specifically through special units known as the *Kaibiles*, in addition to private death squads, who often acted on the advice of the army. The U.S. government often supported the repressive regimes as a part of its anti-Communist policies during the Cold War. The violence faced by the Mayan people peaked between 1978 and 1986. Catholic priests and nuns also often faced violence as they supported the rights of the Mayan people.

After 36 years, the Guatemalan armed conflict ended in 1996 when the government signed a peace accord (the Oslo Accords) with the insurgent group, the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG). Part of the accords directed the United Nations to organize a Commission of Historical Clarification (CEH). It began work in July 1997, funded by a number of countries, including the United States. In February 1999, it released its report, "Guatemala: Memory of Silence," which stated that a governmental policy of genocide was carried out against the Mayan Indians. The CEH concluded the army committed genocide against four specific groups: the Ixil Mayas; the Q'anjob'al and Chuj Mayas; the K'iche' Mayas of Joyabaj, Zacualpa and Chiché; and the Achi Mayas.

In November 1998, three former members of a "civil patrol" were convicted in the first case arising from the genocide. In September 2009, the courts sentenced Military Commissioner Felipe Cusanero to 150 years in prison for the crime of enforced disappearance of six members of the Choatulum indigenous community. In June 2011, General Héctor Mario López Fuentes was caught and charged with genocide and crimes against humanity. In August 2011, four soldiers were sentenced to 30 years for each murder plus 30 years for crimes against humanity, totaling 6,060 years each for the massacre in a village of Dos Erres in Guatemala's northern Petén region.

## Some Resources on This Topic

### Books:

- "Testimony: Death of a Guatemalan Village," by Victor Montejo and Victor Perera, Translator
- "Silence on the Mountain: Stories of Terror, Betrayal, and Forgetting in Guatemala," by Daniel Wilkinson
- "I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala," by Rigoberta Menchu
- "Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala," by Victoria Sanford

### Web sites:

- [http://www.ppu.org.uk/genocide/g\\_guatemala.html](http://www.ppu.org.uk/genocide/g_guatemala.html)
- <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/guatemala/genocide/round1/summary1.pdf>
- <http://shr.aas.org/guatemala/ceh/report/english/toc.html>
- <http://www.preventgenocide.org/edu/pastgenocides/guatemala/resources/>

