

A Visit to Guatemala's Past

September 12, 2005
The New York Times

In mid-July, workers from the office of Guatemala's human rights ombudsman discovered, in a police base, stacks and stacks of files - apparently, the complete files of the National Police. The files date back to 1902 - but significantly, they cover the 36-year period of Guatemala's civil war, which ended in 1996. During the war, 200,000 people were killed and 50,000 forced to disappear. Guatemala's truth commission called the government's actions during the war genocide.

This is probably the biggest trove of files found in the history of Latin America, which is both good and bad. It will be of immense use to historians, and will likely provide information on what happened to hundreds of disappeared people.

The files may also contain key evidence for trying those responsible for major crimes. But the archive is so big that no one in Guatemala is quite sure how to deal with it. The country's national archives lacks the expertise, money and space to handle them. Guatemala needs outside financing and expert advice to secure the police files and to assure that they are handled properly.

Security is the most urgent need. The police files need to be physically protected, and they need to be scanned so that the information could survive a fire or selective theft.

While the government can truthfully plead poverty to explain the files' appalling vulnerability, plenty of government officials who are themselves complicit in war crimes have been less than enthusiastic about the police files' discovery. Fortunately, Guatemala also has other government officials who are talking to American and United Nations organizations about financing closed-circuit television, scanners and other security measures.

Even if Guatemala manages the files well, their use will be limited if citizens aren't allowed to see them, which is best done by passing a law guaranteeing freedom of information. And it is uncertain whether the files will lead to justice; Guatemala's judicial system is fragile enough to be overwhelmed by threats and corruption. To deal with the past, Guatemala needs to solve its present-day problems.