

# Years after civil war, Guatemalan activists still face challenges

GUATEMALA CITY – When Auxiliary Bishop Juan Gerardi Conedera of Guatemala City was bludgeoned to death in his garage 11 years ago, government officials and Catholic leaders vowed his death would not be in vain.

Two days before his death April 26, 1998, Bishop Gerardi released a report that documented crimes committed by police and military during the country's 36-year civil war.

This year, in March, Guatemala's lead human rights investigator, Sergio Morales, released his own damning report, "Right to Know," on crimes committed during the civil war. The report led to the arrest of two police officials on charges that they oversaw the disappearance of an anti-war activist.

It also led to the abduction of Morales' wife, who was tortured, burned with cigarettes, sexually assaulted and released hours later. Morales has said the only reason the captors kidnapped his wife was to lure him into a trap in which they could kill him.

The crime served as a reminder that human rights are still a tenuous concept in Guatemala.

As officials from the Archbishop's Human Rights Office in Guatemala City gathered in late April to honor Bishop Gerardi's legacy, the connection between the country's civil war and today's struggles with democracy has not been lost.

"During his time, (Bishop) Gerardi talked about the need to fight against impunity and against corruption and for human rights," said Nery Rodenas, director of the office. "It's not much different today."

More than a decade after the war ended, the conditions for human rights investigations are as difficult as they were during the war. But the church's human rights office has continued the work that Bishop Gerardi, who co-founded the office,

began.

The office works to exhume war graves, search for the children of those who disappeared during the war, and provides mental health assistance to victims of the conflict. Its historical memory project, which documents the experiences of those affected by the war, is an important piece of helping provide closure to victims and bringing to justice the perpetrators of war crimes.

Bishop Gerardi's 1998 report and a later U.N.-backed truth commission identified hundreds of massacres committed by the military during the war, which resulted in some 200,000 deaths or disappearances. Government forces carried out more than 90 percent of the killings.

While prosecutors have won convictions against some who carried out killings, there has yet to be a prosecution of a high-ranking military or government official. Human rights groups say impunity for war-crime violators has a direct effect on today's circumstances.

"Guatemalans have the right to know the truth about their past. It is a fundamental right and psychological necessity for the victims of abuses," Agnes Callamard, executive director of Article 19, a human rights group that denounced the attack against Morales' wife. "It is also essential for the country's healing process and democratic evolution."

Church officials see signs of progress on some human rights issues. The police archives, on which Morales based his report, recently were opened to the public. This allows family members of victims "disappeared" during the war to search police records for clues as to why they were abducted.

And Rodenas and Cardinal Rodolfo Quezada Toruno of Guatemala City successfully pushed for a two-year extension of the U.N.-funded International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, an independent group empowered to investigate illegal armed groups in the country.

The country emerged from the civil war into a period of unrest, with drug traffickers and youth gangs operating throughout the country. Guatemala is one of the most

dangerous countries in the Americas, with a homicide rate roughly eight times that of the United States, according to government statistics. Yet only 2 percent of crimes are solved, according to the United Nations.

“We keep feeling the effects of the corruption, the violence and the impunity,” the same things Bishop Gerardi stood against, said Vitalino Similox, secretary-general of the Christian Ecumenical Council of Guatemala, at one of several events marking the anniversary of Bishop Gerardi’s death. “We believe in this fight. That is why we are here. This country wants peace.”

The Archbishop’s Human Rights Office in Guatemala City grew out of the National Reconciliation Commission, which Bishop Gerardi and Cardinal Quezada were named to head in 1988. The office supported the Recovery of Historical Memory Project overseen by Bishop Gerardi, who sent some 600 volunteers to the field to collect the testimony of Guatemalans affected during the civil war.

The fruit of that work, a four-volume report, titled “Guatemala: Nunca Mas” (“Guatemala: Never Again”) was released April 24, 1998. Two days later, while entering the garage to the church building where he lived, Bishop Gerardi was attacked and killed. In 2001, three former army officers were convicted of the murder and received 30-year prison terms. Father Mario Orantes, a priest who lived with Bishop Gerardi, received a 20-year sentence.

Despite the convictions, the case looking into Bishop Gerardi’s death remains open. According to the country’s attorney general’s office, 13 former members of the military are being investigated for the death.