



MILITARY BEARING: President Otto Perez Molina is the first military man to rule Guatemala since 1986. **REUTERS/CARLOS JASSO**

REMAKING MAJOR TITO INTO PRESIDENT PEREZ

A former general brings desperately needed leadership to his Guatemala, and some worrisome baggage

BY MICA ROSENBERG AND
MIKE MCDONALD
TZALBAL, GUATEMALA, NOV 10

A GENERATION AGO, HIGH IN the Cuchumatanes mountains, a tough military officer known as Major Tito was a commander during a brutal period of Guatemala's civil war.

His beard was bushy, his hair thick and

curly, and he donned a tilted red beret, a sign of his training as a Kaibil, Guatemala's elite special forces.

People in this tiny village say he passed through here in the early 1980s, after the army had razed Tzalbal in its quest to hunt down leftist guerrillas.

Witnesses still recall the horrors of army-led massacres before Major Tito's arrival: soldiers executing 20 people in front of the

church, cutting off the arms and gouging out the eyes and tongues of the villagers while the rest of the town was forced to watch. Forty more villagers were burned alive in another incident, and hundreds fled into the mountains for months to escape further attacks.

Today, Guatemala again faces chaos. Mexico's drug war has spilled over its borders. Traffickers assert control in some



PEREZ IS CONFIDENT HE WILL NOT BE HELD TO ACCOUNT FOR ALLEGED ATROCITIES. "I HAVE NOTHING TO HIDE," HE SAYS.

rural areas. Violent street gangs run wild in some cities. And Major Tito -- the once black-bearded warrior who is now a clean-shaven, elegantly attired 60-year-old -- is again in command.

Retired General Otto Perez -- the man formerly known as Major Tito -- was elected as Guatemala's president on Sunday. He will be the first military man to run the country since it returned to civilian rule in 1986, after a string of military dictatorships.

As he steps into the role, his record in the civil war that lasted from 1960 to 1996 is coming under renewed scrutiny. Human rights groups believe atrocities were committed by troops under his command, claims also made in witness accounts from a court case. Still, they have not presented clear evidence and Perez has never been charged.

Perez adamantly denies allegations of wrongdoing. "I can tell you it is totally false," he told Reuters on the eve of his election victory. He said he was proud of his role during the war. "I have nothing to hide."

Declassified U.S. documents from the civil war years support the Perez perspective. They suggest he was one of the Guatemalan army's most progressive officers -- one who moved against General Efraín Ríos Montt,

widely seen as the most brutal dictator of the war. They also indicate Perez played a key role in the peace process.

Today, many Guatemalans see Perez as the man who can keep drug traffickers and youth gangs at bay. They have turned to him not in spite of his perceived iron fist but because of it.

He won the election by promising to crush violent crime, a powerful message in a country that is one of the world's most deadly. A United Nations international report found that about 41 of every 100,000 people were murdered in Guatemala last year, a homicide rate eight times higher than that of the United States and 50 times that of Germany.

Although Perez has pledged a crackdown against violence and impunity, human rights workers are concerned about his own role in the civil war and whether he will let the trials of some of his former commanders for alleged human rights atrocities go forward.

Perez has not made his position clear on the issue. He says he cannot intervene in genocide cases or overturn sentences already handed down but neither has he thrown his support behind the trials.

"I'm going to be respectful of the law. Here no one can be above the law," he said.



A NEW GENERATION: A young Perez supporter at a rally of the right-wing Patriot Party. **REUTERS/JORGE DAN LOPEZ**

"Justice has to take its course. The president cannot decide the law or rule on any of these cases."

PEREZ WAS IN THE Cuchumatanes in the early 1980s, arriving just after the most intense period of army massacres during of the war.

Court testimony from an ongoing case in Spain against Ríos Montt does mention Perez, and though the testimony alleges that abuses took place under his watch in the Cuchumatanes, the evidence appears thin. Perez has not been charged.

The main testimony comes from two witnesses. One claims that Major Tito ordered the burning of towns in the area he controlled. The other said he was interrogated by Major Tito after surviving a massacre and that he was then tortured by soldiers under Tito's command.

In a separate case, U.S. activist Jennifer Harbury has tried to bring a court case in Guatemala claiming that Perez, when he headed Guatemala's military intelligence unit, was responsible for the torture and disappearance of her guerrilla commander husband, Efraín Bamaca.

Prosecutors have said there is not enough evidence in the case, although Harbury is refusing to give up.

Perez says his mission was to help rebuild towns terrorized by the war, not terrorize them. He has never been called before any court, and rights experts have not tied him to



ROAD TO RECONCILIATION: Guatemala has lost faith in its justice system. **REUTERS/JORGE DAN LOPEZ**

any massacres.

"I had to defend the lives of many Guatemalans and rescue many Guatemalans who were being held by guerrilla forces ... I have no regrets. I am proud," Perez told Reuters.

He says he was part of a group of captains that stood up to Rios Montt -- the dictator who imposed "scorched earth" tactics in areas of the country where rebel forces were active -- and that he is most proud of his role in the peace process.

"It fell to me to represent the army and take part in the negotiations and the signing of the peace accords. I had to convince a very tough sector of the army that didn't believe in the peace process," he said.

WITHOUT QUESTION, PEREZ remains loyal to an army that was among the most brutal in Latin America at the height of the Cold War.

Perez has repeatedly defended the military's role in the conflict. While conceding there were atrocities committed by the military, he says Marxist rebel forces were also guilty.

"There are things that can't be hidden," he told Reuters in another interview. "There were abuses, there were excesses during the internal armed conflict ... and both sides were involved, the army and the guerrillas."

Nearly a quarter of a million people died or went missing during the civil war. A United Nations-backed Truth Commission concluded that 80 percent of the victims were Mayans and 93 percent of rights violations were committed by state security forces and allied paramilitary and civil defense groups.

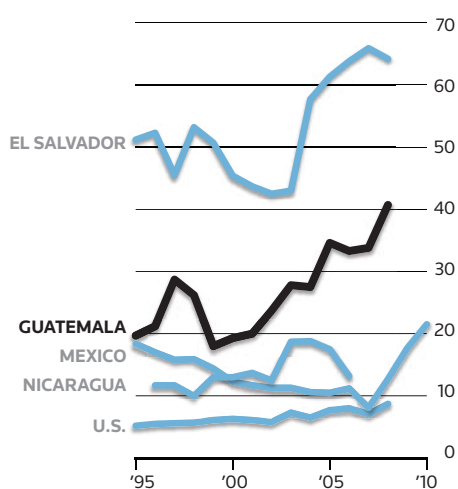
Perez says the Truth Commission report focused too much on the army's role.

The army leaders who ordered the worst massacres have for years walked free, some holding positions of political power, but that may soon change.

In the past year, with the help of a newly installed crusading attorney general, long-stalled cases are moving forward. Arrest warrants have been issued for former President Oscar Mejia and other high-ranking former officers, for instance.

Parallel cases in both local and Spanish courts charge there was a genocide against the Maya population in Guatemala. The lawyers say they are focusing on the top of the military hierarchy during the worst of the war years, when Perez was just a mid-level commander. He did not ascend to the rank

Murder rate per 100,000 people



Source: Pan American Health Organization

of general until 1995, a year before the war's end.

IF GUATEMALA CAN PUT once-powerful leaders behind bars and move on -- a process of reconciliation similar to those seen after the "dirty wars" in Argentina and Chile -- it could restore faith in the country's faltering justice system.

But if Perez chooses to protect the former military high-command from scrutiny, or if he is implicated in crime investigations, it could create a crisis of confidence in his government.

"Certainly Perez's military background ... poses some very interesting questions for the country going forward," said Daniel Sachs, an analyst at consultancy firm Control Risks in London. "It's assumed that he was involved in some pretty nasty stuff but there has been no real international investigation either by a civil society group or actually even possibly by a court into what he was up to."

Perez wants to beef up the army, a message broadly popular with those terrified of drug gangs and violent crime. A day after his election victory, he said that he would appoint a former colonel in the army's feared Kaibiles special forces as his interior minister, giving him control of the police.

Some worry about putting soldiers back on the streets and giving former army officers key positions before the military has been completely purged of its old demons.

Clues to understanding how Perez may handle these issues can be found in his complex past, where two strains emerge: a pro-democracy champion who was also in a

position of authority during the most horrific years of the war.

Most of Perez's field experience came in the breathtaking landscape of Nebaj, in the northern region of Quiche. There, men wear dapper, hand-embroidered red and black coats and women weave tasseled scarves with multi-colored pom-poms into their hair.

Every year during the rainy season, landslides block the mountain road that goes to the capital. And many towns have no roads, forcing residents to walk for hours to hitch the nearest ride.

Across the region, stories of the civil war are told over and over again.

"They burned our farm animals, destroyed our houses, entire families were killed. My brothers died, my cousins, my nephews and nieces, they were massacred by the army," said Pedro Herrera, 66, who tends his small corn crop in the village of Tzalbal and is a veterinarian.

"Some were shot, some had their throats slit," he said in halting Spanish, his second language after Mayan Ixil.

After fleeing with his family as refugees, he remembers Major Tito -- Perez -- from when they warily returned in 1983. The army was giving out materials to rebuild but Herrera says Tito ordered troops to force him and other men to join civilian military patrols.

In the sworn testimony from the case in Spain against Rios Montt, a former member of the Guatemalan military recalled meeting Perez in the final months of 1982 in Nebaj.

"He had the jurisdiction near the landing strip ... It was there he burned down an entire community. He killed all the people who lived in that community," the witness said of Perez.

In separate testimony from the same case, a massacre survivor said he was captured by soldiers and transferred in a helicopter to Nebaj where he was interrogated by Perez. He says Perez accused him of being a guerrilla fighter.

"This officer, Otto Perez, was the one in charge. They called him Tito, it was his pseudonym. He was there. He was strongly questioning me," he said, speaking with difficulty in Spanish, his second language.

He says he was then taken to another place by soldiers who held him captive, beating him so badly that three of his ribs were broken. They then tied him up in a room where the floor was covered in blood, he says.

PEREZ HAS DENIED there were massacres of civilians while he was stationed in Nebaj. He



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HORROR STORIES: Pedro Herrera, 66, recalls atrocities that haunt his country. **REUTERS/JORGE DAN LOPEZ**

says he was there for 10 months at the end of 1982 through 1983, and that he was sent to the Ixil-speaking region with a mission to rescue the population and build roads in the hope that residents would trust the army.

"When I arrived in Nebaj, the situation was totally polarized," Perez told Reuters in 2007, when he first ran for president and lost. "We were trying to re-establish a little bit of normality, bring the populations back to towns that had been totally abandoned."

"The priority of the army under my command was to win the confidence of the population," he said in that interview. "Not like how we found them, when they were terrified of the army." Perez would not confirm the exact dates of his deployment.

Few documents link Perez to Nebaj during that time. His name appears only once in a 359-page army internal planning document known as Operacion Sophia. It includes telegrams, detailed reports of troop movements, handwritten maps and planning logs.

On July 22, 1982, Perez is mentioned as having had "contact with enemy" in Salquil, Nebaj, where four people were killed and 18

adults and 12 children "captured."

The Washington-based National Security Archive, an advocacy group that investigates U.S. foreign policy and national security issues, obtained the Operacion Sophia dossier from what it describes as a secret source. It has studied piles of Guatemalan army documents, and says it has evidence that Perez left Nebaj on April, 16, 1983.

The Truth Commission documented three army-led massacres in Nebaj between July 1982 and April 1983. At least 184 people disappeared or were killed or disappeared by state-led forces during that time, according to a Reuters examination of its 450-page appendix of all the human rights violations in Quiche during the war.

THERE IS NO DOUBT that Perez was on the right side of history at some key points in his military career.

He clashed with Rios Montt after the dictator took power as part of a military junta in 1982, and he later defended democratic rule in 1993 by helping depose President Jorge Serrano when Serrano tried to dissolve Congress and suspend the constitution.

Perez then negotiated on behalf of the military in peace talks that finally led to a deal in 1996.

"He's a complex figure," said Kate Doyle, a senior analyst at the Washington-based security archive. "He is a military commander who served at the highest level during the worst years of the scorched earth policy but he was also a military leader who ultimately espoused a democratic position with regard to the formation of the Guatemalan state."

Washington has often praised Perez as part of a progressive faction inside an institution with a brutal reputation.

"They are progressives that grew up with blood stains on their hands, though we have no direct information to suggest that Colonel Perez himself was involved in activities of this nature," said a declassified U.S. government cable from 1994, unearthed by the security archive. "At the same time, it cannot be authoritatively said that this group of progressive officers are not still influenced by their past."

Perez calls the signing of the peace deal the highlight of his military career, although he also concedes that the accords -- which

called for compensation for the victims of the war and an end to the social and economic exclusion of Mayans by aiding access to land and education -- have not been fulfilled.

"There should have been a more aggressive reconciliation process with wider reach and more strength," he said. "I think if that had happened, we would have been able to more quickly recover and to move forward instead of always looking back."

During this election campaign, Perez made an effort to reach out to indigenous communities, donning a woven belt and holding a candle in a spiritual ceremony at one event.

Human rights activists hope it is the reformer in Perez that takes a bigger role, and that he will let the trials of former senior

officers continue.

But they remain wary of his loyalties and worry he might try to remove prosecutors pushing the cases -- or that his interior minister will cancel arrest warrants for Perez's old comrades. Among the arrests made this year of war crimes suspects were former president Oscar Mejia, retired military chief of staff Hector Lopez and a former chief of national police. Mejia was later released on the grounds of ill health.

One key measure of Perez's intentions, they say, will be whether he allows Guatemala's tenacious new attorney general, Claudia Paz y Paz, to stay in the job and continue prosecuting officers accused of atrocities.

"We are trying to prove that justice is not optional ... Either we make this transition

or Guatemala is not a viable country and its conflicts will only deepen instead of being resolved," said Gustavo Meono, a former guerrilla commander who now heads the national police archives.

At the archives he runs, millions of recently discovered documents are helping to put behind bars police officers accused of the forced disappearances of leftists.

"If Otto Perez says he is the 'General of Peace' and that he has a commitment to the peace agenda," Meono said, "then we say 'great,' we take you at your word."

(Additional reporting by Andrea Valencia and Emily Breault in San Francisco, California; editing by Kieran Murray and Blake Morrison)



RECKONING: The national police archives in Guatemala City, where more than 80 million pages of police paperwork are being reviewed for clues about disappearances. REUTERS/JORGE DAN LOPEZ

WAR, TIGHT-KNIT CLASS DEFINE PRESIDENT PEREZ

BY MICA ROSENBERG AND
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Guatemala's next president, retired General Otto Perez, was a small child when a CIA-backed coup overthrew reformist President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954.

The fallout has framed his military and political career.

The democratically elected Arbenz wanted to redistribute land to resolve inequalities, and the move angered United States business interests. With U.S. support, Arbenz was ousted in just nine days -- and replaced by three decades of almost uninterrupted army rule.

Military repression led to an armed rebellion, which was in full swing when Perez entered the military academy at age 16. Perez, who was elected president on Sunday, later joined Guatemala's special forces, the kaibils, whose infamously brutal training included eating dog entrails and biting the heads off live chickens.

But it was the graduating military academy class from the "Escuela Politecnica" in 1969 -- a tight knit group of "rising stars" known as class No. 73 -- that defined his years in uniform, according to declassified U.S. government documents.

"This ... class, which originally consisted of 95 officers, is considered an anomaly within the armed forces because of the exceptional cohesiveness it has maintained throughout the years," said a U.S. department of defense cable dated May 1982. It said class members looked out for each other and gathered at informal events like picnics, dances and birthday parties.

Perez emerged as a leader, top of his academic class and a "standard-bearer" for the rest, recalls Mario Merida who was a year behind Perez at the Escuela Politecnica and later served as deputy intelligence director under his command.

That unity was threatening to General



STANDARD BEARER: General Perez (L) next to former Vice President Luis Flores Asturias after signing a treaty between leftist rebels and the government in December 1996. **REUTERS/KIMBERLY WHITE/FILES**

Efraim Rios Montt, Guatemala's most notorious dictator during the 1960-96 civil war, in which around a quarter million people were killed.

Rios Montt took power in a 1982 military junta and a United Nations-backed Truth Commission that later examined civil war atrocities concluded that he presided over an average 800 killings a month during his 17-month rule.

Apparently nervous that the talented officers would band together to overthrow him, Rios Montt accused Perez and two other officers on the presidential guard and staff of corruption and ordered their arrest, the document from May 1982 says. They were soon released but the point was made, and a fissure grew between Rios Montt and some in the officer corps.

"Most of the soldiers in the presidential guard were sent as a punishment to the areas of combat in Quiche, Huehuetenango and San Marcos," Merida said. "General Perez went with the rank of captain and left as a commander in Nebaj."

Perez served as head of Guatemala's military intelligence unit, known as D-2, and used his wide connections to quickly

move up the ranks, according to a State Department document from 1995, the year he was promoted to general.

Even critics of Guatemala's military give some credit to Perez's group for seeking a way out of the war and the long cycle of violence.

"There was a group within the military that felt ... that only by ultimately ceding power to the civilian leaders would the institution of the army not just survive but thrive," said Kate Doyle, a senior analyst at the Washington-based National Security Archive, a private group that investigates U.S. foreign policy and national security issues.

"It was kind of advanced realpolitik thinking within the military, and Perez was very much a part of that," Doyle said. The U.S. government often praised Perez and his faction as progressives inside an institution with a brutal reputation.

"Colonel Perez and this group of officers bear close watching for several reasons," said another declassified cable from 1994, unearthed by the security archive.

"They are progressives that grew up with blood stains on their hands, though we have no direct information to suggest that Colonel Perez himself was involved in activities of this nature. At the same time, it cannot be authoritatively said that this group of progressive officers are not still influenced by their past."

"In general, their goals are democratic and they may be the best hope for the army at this time," it said.

Two years later, Perez was one of the key figures to sign the peace accords that ended the long civil war.

In 2001, Perez formed the conservative Patriot Party and became a prominent member of Congress, starting his long push for the presidency.

(Editing by Kieran Murray)

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