

មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា

The Value of Archives: An Example from Guatemala

Guatemala is a Central American country whose area and population are about the same as those of Cambodia. And like Cambodia, it recently emerged from what was perhaps the most tragic period in its history: between 1960 and 1996, the nation experienced an internal armed conflict that left 150,000 people dead. Another 45,000 Guatemalans disappeared and nearly 2 million people were displaced in their own country or sought refuge in other nations. Thousands of homes were torn apart and more than 600 villages were destroyed.

Most of the victims were poor indigenous people living in the countryside, and were union members and agricultural workers. But others opposed to repression in Guatemala were targeted as well, such as students, judges, attorneys, witnesses, and journalists. Most of them lived in the capital of Guatemala City. These men, women, and children were subjected to countless human rights violations, including extrajudicial executions, torture, death threats and degradation.

The individual perpetrators of this conflict – the National Police – were a little more difficult to identify. Like Cambodia's Angkar, they maintained a high degree of secrecy. The National Police had two branches. One branch was visible: the police who wore uniforms. They were feared because they gassed, arrested and sometimes tortured demonstrators and others who disagreed with the government. But most of the terror was spread by the Secret Police. They dressed like ordinary people, but formed death squads, particularly against the guerilla movements that were forming in the countryside. They secretly kidnapped, tortured, and executed people.



The exhumed skeleton of a man from the countryside who disappeared in Guatemala (courtesy of the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation)

The Archives' "Discovery"

Like the Khmer Rouge, Guatemala's National Police kept extensive records on people who they perceived to be their enemies. But unlike the Khmer Rouge, who burned as many documents as they could when the National Front and Vietnamese were invading Cambodia, the National Police kept all of their documents, perhaps because they did not fear arrest or future prosecution.

Few people outside the police knew about these records until May 5, 2005. On that day, a news report warned the public that there might be a huge explosion caused by the ordnance materials that had been in storage since 1997 at the National Police Academy in Guatemala City.

Guatemala's Human Rights Ombudsman became worried. He had learned that the explosion could destroy an area with a 1 kilometer radius that contained many homes, schools, businesses and a hospital.

On June 17, 2005, residents of the city woke up to the sound of an explosion in another part of the capital. About a ton of unused projectiles left from the internal armed conflict had blown up and produced a white cloud that many people assumed was toxic, causing widespread fear. This gave the Ombudsman the opportunity to file an appeal to inspect the National Police Academy. And on July 5, his team entered the Academy.

Checking the buildings adjacent to the room where the explosives were stored, the Ombudsman's team found some documents that caught their attention. As they moved from room to room in the complex, they found more and more documents. The team members were astonished: they didn't believe that the files actually existed (the police claimed that their files had either never existed or had been destroyed), much less that they were housed for more than 20 years in a place that was so accessible. They also found 3,500 explosive devices – such as dynamite, grenades, mortars, and the chemical potassium chloride.

Taking Action on the Archives

The Ombudsman's team was faced with a decision: they could close their eyes to what they had found or take action. They chose the latter course and requested a judicial order to perform research on the documents and investigate the human rights violations recorded in them. Their request was granted a week later.

In the meantime, others began to take action to prevent the transfer of documents, including archives that were held in old National Police stations in the countryside. The Ombudsman moved quickly and requested that the Minister of the Interior transfer all the archives to the National Police Academy

for their protection. The Minister agreed and the National Police Commissioner appointed police officers to guard the archives.



The Contents and Condition of the Archives

When I visited Guatemala in November 2006, I was taken to the Archives to see them for myself. The approximately 80 million documents (if laid end to end, they would be about 4.5 kilometers long) stored there were in desperate condition. They were tied in bundles and stacked from floor to

ceiling. Many of the rooms had flooded, destroying some documents, and the constant humidity had damaged many others. Still others had been eaten by insects or plants had germinated on them. Rats scurried among the rooms, and bats and birds flew in through the broken windows at night. Because of poor wiring, there was also the risk of an electrical fire. And no security measures were in place, although personnel were working on the archives.

The Ombudsman quickly implemented measures to protect the documents in these very difficult conditions. The nine women and two men who form the team to preserve the Archives as a Guatemalan National Heritage are assisted by nearly 200 volunteers.

Perhaps 15 to 20% of the documents in the Archives are relevant to the internal armed conflict. The contents of the Archives are diverse; they include applications and paperwork for Guatemalan identification card (*cédula*), applications for drivers' licenses, arrest records for all types of crimes, files on political crimes (for example, the arrest records of people accused of being communists) and fingerprint documentation.



Few of the documents were organized when they were found. However, the team discovered file cabinets marked

“assassinations,” “disappeared” and “homicides,” and folders on victims of political murder. There were also hundreds of rolls of photography containing pictures of bodies, as well as lists of police informants, video tapes and computer disks.

Today, the files are organized by year, month, day, type, and issuing agent. All documentation is kept, whether it seems relevant to the conflict or not.

The team’s work includes locating and preparing the relevant records (the oldest document in the Archives contains arrest warrants from 1885), cleaning them (removing objects such as rusty staples and mold), carrying out research on them, scanning the documents, and entering their contents into a database.

In less than two years, the team has processed around 2,700,000 folios and cleaned organized, and digitized nearly 3 million documents. With funding from the United Nations, and the Swedish and Dutch governments, it is following the “3-2-3” rule, putting documents in three formats (hard, scanned, and digitized copies), two locations (Guatemala and the National Archive of Switzerland), and two copies. This is the same procedure that DC-Cam follows. Our documents are in microfiche, microfilm, and scanned copies (we also plan to digitize them), and are stored in Cambodia and the United States, with copies available on CD and over the internet.



The Importance of the Archives

In the past 18 years, the Human Rights Office of Guatemala has received thousands of reports about violations allegedly committed by the State security forces. And some victims have come forward to tell their stories as well. But with the discovery and documentation of the Archives, for the first time, Guatemala is set to reveal and preserve its modern history, which was written by the perpetrators themselves. It can then begin moving toward both judicial and historical accountability.



For at least the next ten years, the team will continue the demanding and challenging task of preserving the documents and is now taking steps to gain legal authority over the Archives. Once this is done, Guatemala can begin to face its past and reconstruct its recent history. This will help the country to begin building a more egalitarian society and to advance justice.

They have a saying in Guatemala about the people who disappeared during the country's internal conflict: Their lives were denied, and now even their deaths are being denied. But this is about to change. With the opening of these Archives, thousands of families have new hope that they will discover the fate of their relatives in the Archives, breaking the silence at last. As in Cambodia, ordinary people can search for their lost loved ones in the Archives, lawyers can use them to advance justice, scholars can conduct research there, and future generations can find in the Archives reasons to work to improve their society.

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