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Raging Drug War Boosts Controversial Ex-General

By **NICHOLAS CASEY**

(See [Correction & Amplification below](#))

NEBAJ, Guatemala—This Mayan highland town was once caught in the cross fire between Marxist guerrillas and a right-wing military during Guatemala's 36-year civil war.

Today, it is at the crossroads of a new war, one fueled by drugs rather than ideology.

Portrait of a General

Otto Perez Molina, who could become the first Guatemalan president to come from the military since the civilian rule began, may have played a more significant role in the country's atrocities than previously believed. See some key dates in his military career.



With narcotics traffickers spilling south from Mexico and homicide rates skyrocketing, residents are faced with a difficult choice: Leave the government to civilian leaders or set aside difficult memories and turn to the military ranks.

On Sunday, Guatemala holds elections widely expected to make retired general Otto Pérez Molina the next president. His election would be the first time a former military officer has taken power since a 1996 agreement ended a conflict that left an estimated 200,000 people dead.

Guatemala's escalating drug violence also is drawing U.S. attention. In June, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pledged \$300 million to fight drug traffickers in Central America. The largest share is likely headed to Guatemala, where murder rates, she said, were at "civil war levels."

Mr. Pérez has said during candidate debates he would welcome U.S. troops to battle drug gangs in his country, which Mexico has never allowed.

Mr. Perez, 60 years old, won the first round of voting in late September on a law-and-order platform and the slogan "La Mano Dura," the firm hand. A Nov. 3 poll by Guatemala's leading newspaper, Prensa Libre, showed him leading his opponent, businessman Manuel Baldizón, 58% to 44%.

"We don't want more of the same, because we want security and justice, because we want to put the brakes on the violence that has affected us and has us defeated," he said during a campaign stop this week.



Jean-Marie Simon
Otto Pérez Molina in Nebaj, 1982

That message is resonating in a country where the homicide rate—now eight times that of the U.S.—is escalating, and gruesome headlines are strikingly similar to those in Mexico. In May, 27 people were found beheaded on a secluded ranch, authorities said, the work of Mexico's Zetas gang.

The day-to-day violence has resurrected memories of husbands taken, children killed, crops destroyed and other tragedies of Guatemala's long war. It also has stoked a broad desire for civil order.

"People are paralyzed by fear," said Anita Isaacs, a professor of political science and Guatemala expert at Haverford College. "His message, for better or worse, suddenly has new appeal, even among those who were the war's worst victims."

Mr. Pérez lost the 2007 presidential election to Alvaro Colom, who painted Mr. Pérez's military role as a liability. Turning now to the former general again raises long-buried questions about the military's role in the civil war, including allegations against Mr. Pérez.

Spain's National Court has been investigating human rights violations by the military regime of Efraín Ríos Montt, Guatemala's former dictator. Spanish Judge Santiago Pedraz now plans to widen the inquiry to include actions by Mr. Pérez, according to a person with knowledge of the case. New testimony is planned for December.



Agence France-Presse/Getty Images
Presidential candidate and retired general Otto Pérez Molina at a speech Friday outside of Guatemala City.

Guatemala's top prosecutor has opened an investigation into Mr. Pérez's alleged role in the disappearance of Efraín Bámaca, a guerrilla fighter who was married to a U.S. citizen, according to a prosecutor and a person with knowledge of the case.

The U.S. State Department, in response to questions about the disappearance of Mr. Bámaca, said it has "over the years urged the Guatemalan government to investigate" such allegations and was aware of the allegation against Mr. Pérez.

In an interview, Mr. Pérez, who hasn't been charged with a crime related to the war, denied any wrongdoing. "These are lies," motivated by political opponents, he said.

"There has not been one person who has been able to go to a court to say that Otto Pérez had responsibility in a single human rights violation."

Mr. Pérez said he was a reformer, who signed the peace agreement and delivered government help to this region during the war's darkest hours.

As a democratically elected president, Mr. Perez would be immune from prosecution in Guatemala during his four-year term. Yet he faces the possibility of embarrassing revelations.



Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

Presidential candidate Manuel Baldizón greets supporters this week. He trails Otto Pérez Molina in polls.

Neither the Spanish court nor Guatemala's attorney general's office would discuss their investigations of Mr. Pérez.

For two years of the war, Mr. Pérez directed the fight against rebel forces in the region. Some residents recall the time with grief and anger. One war widow said she would never forgive the loss of her husband during Mr. Pérez's tenure. "This man, we don't want him to return," said the woman, who did not want her name used. "Look what harm he has done to us."

Tiburcio Utuy, a 70-year-old corn farmer, said he was mistaken for a Marxist guerrilla and tied to a tree by soldiers during a brutal interrogation at the height of the war 28 years ago.

Afterward, he said, he was taken to the army commander, Mr. Pérez, then an army major. "He told me he hoped to God that all of us died," Mr. Utuy testified in 2008 to Spanish investigators. A videotape of his testimony was viewed by the Journal.

Mr. Utuy's recollections, along with interviews of residents here and a review of declassified documents, allege torture and killing of civilians by soldiers in Mr. Pérez's command—accusations that Mr. Pérez vigorously denied.

The population of this mountain town of 50,000 is still mostly indigenous, Ixil speaking, with many living in dirt-floor poverty.

Decades ago, the church in the central plaza was taken over by the army, its bell towers turned to lookout posts. The former nunnery housed Mr. Pérez and his men.

Exhumations continue to unearth loved ones, more than 600 in the area, who long ago disappeared in the war. They include both villagers and guerrillas, said Nicolás Corio, who heads the nongovernmental group doing the work with funding from private donors and the U.N. "Many of these people lost everything," he said, "their families, crops, their homes, their lives."



Associated Press

Former Guatemalan Army Gen. Otto Pérez Molina receives a rifle from a militia member in 1996, the year the country's 36-year civil war ended.

Mr. Pérez, the son of a middle-class doctor, came of age during the conflict. For decades, beginning in 1960, a right-wing military battled Communist guerrillas in the mountainous highlands, a major Cold War theater. A truth commission set up by the United Nations later called the killings "acts of genocide against groups of Mayan people."

Mr. Pérez graduated from Guatemala's main military academy in 1969. In 1982, Mr. Ríos Montt, an army general, took power in a coup and promised to squelch the rebel insurgency in the countryside in a campaign whose slogan was "draining the water from the fish."

There's no evidence that Messrs. Ríos Montt and Pérez worked directly together at the time. But Mr. Pérez rose swiftly in the regime and was put in command of counterinsurgency operations in Nebaj in 1982.

Mr. Pérez was proud of his two years of service here, he said, arriving at a time of violence by both sides.

"The role I played in that time was to defend those in Nebaj," he said. "When I arrived, the place was polarized. People were dying of hunger in the mountains and I got the people to trust in the military."

Some villagers here say Mr. Pérez was more tolerant than other commanders, and the bloodshed slowed in the two years he was in charge. Several said he convened meetings in the central plaza introducing himself as "a soldier of the people." He said he wanted to help people.

"They sent him to be the good face of the military during what had been a very bad time," recalled Father Rigoberto Pérez, a Catholic priest who directed a church investigation into the killing of local villagers during the war. The church found a marked drop during the period of Mr. Pérez's command although at least seven were recorded, said Father Pérez, who is not related to the retired general.

One local woman, 51 years old, said she still does not know the fate of her first husband nor why he was seized. He was taken by soldiers in September 1982, shortly after Mr. Pérez took command of the area, said the woman who did not want to be identified.

"You're planting corn? You're a guerrilla. You're doing work? You're doing work for the guerrillas," said the woman. She went to the makeshift army base to ask for her husband, she said, and Mr. Pérez came out and struck her face. She returned on 29 consecutive days before a soldier who spoke Ixil told her it would be dangerous to continue.

The woman said she moved on to the municipal morgue, where she saw many bodies with missing arms and ears. She never found her husband.

A 44-year-old artisan said he was conscripted into a civil brigade during the war. At age 15, he said, he was part of a crew that collected corpses after military engagements that involved Mr. Pérez's soldiers. Many, including women, appeared to have been tortured before being killed, he said.

The man, who did not want his name used, said he once helped collect the bodies of eight farmers from a village called La Pista that were put on display in the Nebaj town square. Mr. Pérez warned a gathered crowd that the dead—some missing lips, ears and noses—were guerrillas, said the man, who wept as he recalled the scene.

"I don't know who you could have spoke with or who gave you this information," said Mr. Pérez, the former head of military intelligence who retired from the service 11 years ago. "If there had been people who had accused me in court, surely I would have been tried."

Mr. Utuy recounted his testimony to the Spanish court during an interview at his home, a three-room, cinderblock building in a mountain village of a dozen or so houses connected by dirt road.

He said he was captured by soldiers while foraging for food. After being hanged from a tree, beaten and burned with a poker while being questioned, Mr. Utuy said he was taken by helicopter to Nebaj.

Mr. Pérez, he said, showed him to a group of townspeople with the warning: "This is what would happen to you if you join the guerrilla fighters." Mr. Utuy was taken to another military base where he was held and tortured before escaping five months later, he said.

Mr. Pérez said he knew of no torture of any detainees during his command. "They are lying," he said. "These things have no backing. No substance."

A formerly secret Guatemalan military document called "Operation Sofía" describes how assaults against guerrillas sometimes turned into attacks on nonpartisans. The report was entered as evidence of human rights abuses in the Spanish court by the U.S.-based nonprofit National Security Archive, based at George Washington University and Spanish human rights attorney Almudena Bernabéu. A copy was viewed by the Journal.

Mr. Pérez is mentioned several times in the 359-page document. At one point, he is described helping lead soldiers who chased and killed four villagers believed to be assisting rebels.

Mr. Pérez said the document was a forgery, with his name planted for political purposes.

A Guatemalan government commission has declared it authentic, and the attorney general's office this year filed genocide charges against former armed forces chief Héctor Mario López Fuentes, who is accused of being the architect of the plan and responsible for the killing of hundreds of citizens.

Mr. López, who could not be reached for comment, has refused to enter a plea in the case. His lawyers have told the court he is unfit to stand trial due to health problems, the attorney general's office said.

Guatemala Opens Inquiry into Disappearance of Ex-Rebel Fighter

By NICHOLAS CASEY

Rebel fighter Efraín Bámaca went missing in March 1992 during a jungle skirmish where the military reported he was killed by soldiers.

Nearly two decades later, the Guatemalan attorney general's office has opened an investigation into Mr. Bámaca's death and the role of Otto Pérez Molina, who was head of military intelligence at the time, according to a prosecutor and a person with knowledge of the case.



Jennifer Harbury
Jennifer Harbury with a picture of her husband, Efraín Bámaca.

Questions about Mr. Bámaca's death have swirled for years, as his wife Jennifer Harbury—an attorney and U.S. citizen—waged a campaign for answers from the U.S. and Guatemalan governments.

Ms. Harbury's inquiries prompted the release a decade ago of declassified U.S. intelligence documents, including a State Department document suggesting the Guatemalan army placed another body in Mr. Bámaca's grave, while authorities interrogated Mr. Bámaca in a detention center.

During an August 1993 exhumation of Mr. Bámaca's grave—attended by a State Department official—a forensics team concluded the body in the grave did not belong to Mr. Bámaca, according to the 1993 U.S. document.

A Pentagon cable from July 1995 provides the only on-the-record account from the Guatemalan military that connects Mr. Pérez to the case. It recounts a conversation between a top Guatemalan prosecutor and a high-ranking Guatemalan military officer named Julio Roberto Alpírez.

Mr. Alpírez said that after Mr. Bámaca's capture, the military had been "using Bámaca as a guide to search for hidden weapons caches," according to the document. After a patrol was attacked, the document said, "the decision was then made to eliminate Bámaca."

Mr. Pérez arrived by helicopter to pick up Mr. Bámaca, Mr. Alpírez said in the cable. Mr. Bámaca was not seen again, according to the cable.

Mr. Pérez would not respond to Mr. Alpírez's account but in an interview denied any wrongdoing. Mr. Alpírez couldn't be reached for comment.

A later Pentagon cable—dated March 1996 and first made public that year—contains an anonymous letter sent to the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala City several years after Mr. Bámaca's disappearance. Its account differs from the earlier cable.

The letter, which U.S. officials alleged was written by disgruntled Guatemalan military men, said officials holding Mr. Bámaca grew worried when Ms. Harbury came to the country to find her missing husband.

Mr. Pérez, in a meeting convened to decide Mr. Bámaca's fate, disagreed with others who said Mr. Bámaca should be released to avoid problems with the U.S., according to the letter. He "ordered officers under his command at the directorate of intelligence of the army" to "physically disappear Bámaca," the letter said.

Mr. Pérez, in the interview, said: "I will not waste my time responding to anonymous letters," he said.

The Guatemalan attorney general's office declined comment.

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Correction & Amplification

This article on the Guatemalan presidential election incorrectly stated results of a recent poll. A Nov. 3 poll said Otto Pérez held 58% of the vote to Manuel Baldizón's 41%, not 55% to 44%.

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