

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

October 21, 2011

Re: United States' involvement in 1954 Guatemalan coup d'état.

Dear President Obama,

The Center for Constitutional Rights and Rights Action urge your administration to issue an apology to the Guatemalan people and the family of ousted President Jacob Arbenz Guzman for U.S. involvement in the 1954 Guatemalan coup d'état. Yesterday the Guatemalan government hosted a ceremony to officially apologize to the Arbenz family for the coup d'état and the subsequent human rights violations perpetrated by the Guatemalan state. It is time for the United States to apologize for its involvement in the coup and those human rights violations as well.

The United Nations' independent Historical Clarification Commission, in a report entitled "Memoria del Silencio," concluded that at least 200,000 Guatemalans were killed in the civil war that resulted from the 1954 coup, including 626 massacres, and that 93 percent of those violations were determined to have been committed by U.S.-supported military and paramilitary forces.¹ Between the years of 1952 and 1954, the United States knowingly participated in psychological warfare,² violations of international law,³ mass-manipulation of the Guatemalan people to further U.S. interests,⁴ human rights violations,⁵ and the illegal overthrow of a legitimate government.

An apology is long overdue. To date, no United States official has issued an apology for U.S. involvement in the 1954 coup. President Bill Clinton, in a speech on March 10, 1999, said, "It is important that I state clearly that support for military forces or intelligence units which engaged in violent and widespread repression of the kind described in the report ("Memoria del Silencio") was wrong, and the United States must not repeat that mistake. We must and we will instead continue to support the peace and reconciliation process in Guatemala."⁶ That is the closest that any U.S. official has come to apologizing for U.S. involvement in the Guatemalan coup and ensuing civil war.

¹ Harris, Bob. "Guatemala: Clinton's Latest Damn Near Apology." *The Humanist*.
<http://www.thehumanist.org/humanist/articles/harris.html>. May/June 1999.

²Schlesinger, Stephen and Stephen Kinzer. *Bitter Fruit*. Anchor Press/ Doubleday. pp. 114-115. 1982.

³ Cook, Blanche Wiesen. *The Declassified Eisenhower*. Doubleday & Company, Inc. p. 268. 1981.

⁴Schlesinger, Stephen and Stephen Kinzer. *Bitter Fruit*. Anchor Press/ Doubleday. p. 111. 1982.

⁵ Harris, Bob. "Guatemala: Clinton's Latest Damn Near Apology."

⁶Kettle, Martin and Jeremy Lennard. "Clinton Apology to Guatemala." *The Guardian*.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/1999/mar/12/jeremylennard.martinkettle>. March 11, 1999.

Journalists and academics have concluded that while inflammatory rhetoric was used by U.S. government officials to portray that President Arbenz was attempting to turn Guatemala into a “Soviet beachhead in the Western Hemisphere,” the U.S. government’s primary interest in motivating the coup was actually protecting the financial interests of United Fruit Company.⁷ In the wake of the coup, the U.S. government sponsored exhaustive investigations that were not able to generate any evidence linking President Arbenz and the Soviet Union. The source of United Fruit Company’s contention with President Arbenz was proposed land reform legislation.⁸

The United States government knowingly and actively orchestrated a propaganda network based in Miami to manipulate Guatemalan citizens with false information,⁹ the illegal surveillance of merchant ships during peacetime,¹⁰ arming and training revolutionary forces,¹¹ the eventual ousting of President Arbenz, and the creation of an illegitimate government in Guatemala under President Carlos Castillo Armas,¹² which resulted in a 36-year Civil War during which a multitude of human rights violations occurred.¹³

Of course, an apology in and of itself is simply a gesture if it is not accompanied by a substantial policy change. The willingness of the United States to support illegitimate governments in Latin America did not begin and unfortunately did not end with Guatemala. In fact, Guatemala was one of the most atrocious but still just one of the bloody, repressive and destabilizing interventions in Latin America and the Caribbean that the U.S. government supported over the last century. Unfortunately, this interventionism continues today. Your October 5, 2011 White House meeting with and pledged support for President Porfirio Lobo of Honduras, in the aftermath of the June 2009 coup d’état and the subsequent illegitimate elections there, is a cogent example of the United States’ continued wrongheaded policy approach to Latin America. Honduras is engulfed in a wave of politically motivated violence where scores of opposition activists and journalists have been murdered since the coup. Support for the repressive Lobo government is in direct contradiction to the nationwide peoples’ movement of Honduras which is demanding an end to impunity for the repression against their movement and accountability for the 2009 coup d’état.

Examining the U.S. policy decisions and actions around the 1954 coup in Guatemala, and subsequent coups in Central America during the extreme repression of the 1970’s and 1980’s, would be an important step in changing U.S. policy in Central America. All information possessed by the U.S. government related to human rights violations and war crimes in Central America during this time should be released, and an inquiry should be commissioned to examine the U.S. role in the 1954 coup in Guatemala and subsequent coups in Central America.

⁷Norouzi, Ebrahim. “The Dulles Brothers... How to Wreak Havoc in Guatemala and Iran.” The Mossadegh Project. <http://www.mohammadmossadegh.com/news/dulles-brothers/>. April 7, 2010.

⁸Schlesinger and Kinzer. *Bitter Fruit*. p. 76.

⁹Schlesinger and Kinzer. *Bitter Fruit*. pp. 111, 114-115, 129, 167-170, 176, 184-185, 192, 209.

¹⁰ Cook, Blanche Wiesen. *The Declassified Eisenhower*. Although arms were eventually discovered on the Swedish merchant ship *Alfhem*.

¹¹Schlesinger and Kinzer. *Bitter Fruit*. pp. 174-175, 150-157

¹² *Ibid.* pp. 122, 125-128.

¹³ Harris, Bob. “Guatemala: Clinton’s Latest Damn Near Apology.”

We urge you to change course and support the inspiring movements for democracy, human rights, and justice in Central America and throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. A strong step in the right direction would be acknowledging and examining the role the U.S. government played in the 1954 coup d'état of Guatemala and following the example of the Guatemalan government by issuing an apology.

Signed,

The Center for Constitutional Rights
&
Rights Action