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## Guatemala’s ‘Little School of the Americas’

Dawn Paley

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COBAN, GUATEMALA—Since February, forensic anthropologists have turned up over 400 skeletons at a military base in Coban, Guatemala, in what has fast become one of the largest discoveries of a clandestine mass grave in the country. During the country’s 36 year long internal armed conflict that led to acts of genocide, the base at Coban was a center of military coordination and intelligence.

But what sets this dig apart is that it is taking place at a military base that remains active today: foreign military and police arrive regularly at the base to [train troops](#) from Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic. In 2006, the military zone in Coban was renamed CREOMPAZ, which stands for Regional Training Command for Peacekeeping Operations.

The horrid history of the military base in Coban—and the impunity with which mass killings of men, women and children were carried out—provides a disturbing backdrop for present day “peacekeeping” operations.

Evidence of the ongoing excavation is all over Guatemala’s capital city, in the form of ads gracing billboards and bus stops. On the right hand side of the ad is a stock photo of a woman in a surgical mask, looking at a medical instrument. In Los Angeles, it might be a weight loss ad, in Houston, promotion for a private hospital. Not here. Instead, text across the top reads: “Do you

have a family member disappeared between 1940 and 1996?” Then, “with DNA we are identifying them. A spit sample is enough.”

The Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala (FAFG) put the ad campaign together in attempt to identify the skeletons of the disappeared by matching them with DNA from their living family members. FAFG anthropologists are at work around Guatemala, digging, dusting, recording and finally exhuming human remains.

CREOMPAZ is one of the largest current excavations. “We have a few more than 400 trenches, where we’ve found I think 60 graves, and we’ve found 426 skeletons, mostly men, like everywhere else, but there’s also women, and what’s particular to CREOMPAZ is that there are also many children,” said José Suasnavar, the executive sub-director of FAFG, during an interview in Guatemala City in October. FAFG is the only group in Guatemala dedicated to identifying the estimated 50,000 disappeared during the country’s internal armed conflict.

Most of the dead found at CREOMPAZ are believed to be people who disappeared from communities around the country. Men and women kidnapped by the army on their way to the shop to buy some food for their children, people who said goodbye to their families one morning and headed off to school or to work, never to be heard from again. Evidence uncovered by forensic anthropologists shows that people disappeared from various regions were later brought to the base at Coban by soldiers for interrogation and torture, followed by extrajudicial execution and secretburial.

The exhumations at CREOMPAZ call up scenes of terror.

“What is radically different about this military base...is that here there is up to 62 people buried in one single grave, representing a single event,” said Sausnavar.

There are few bullet wounds among the dead, according to Sausnavar. Most of the skeletons still show evidence of being bound, and many reveal bones that had been broken, healed and re-broken, indicating that the dead had been tortured and interrogated, some for lengthy periods of time, before they were killed and thrown in the pits.

The dig in Coban is revealing the gruesome reality of the country’s internal armed conflict, where people labeled subversives—political and student activists, Indigenous leaders and community members, and others— were kidnapped and tortured *en masse*. Children were also murdered before being dumped in clandestine graves at the base. All of this took place within the protective confines of a military controlled area.

Of the 28 former military areas the FAFG has dug since 1996, 24 have turned up bodies. Some of those digs are still works in progress, while more military bases, zones and detachments remain to be investigated. The dig at CREOMPAZ has turned up by far the largest number of corpses of any base.

“When the peace accords were signed, many military bases or detachments were reduced and closed. But the military remained here the whole time,” said Suasnavar of the base at Coban.

“They say to us ‘we didn’t know that that happened, it was another time, it was other people, but you found it so there’s no other option than to keep working,’ right, those have been the words that they use with respect to our findings. But the continuity in the structure and function and the territorial control of this location has been strictly military.”

Regardless of the mass graves at the base, military and police training continues there, supported by countries like the US and Canada.

“The facilities have a sort of rank as a military organization of the United Nations, in fact the Guatemalan soldiers and officials that are based there wear the distinctive blue helmets,” said Iduvina Hernández Batres from the Guatemala City based organization Security and Democracy (Sedem). “This is happening, and this unit exists there, regardless of the fact that this property has been documented to have constituted an enormous clandestine cemetery.”

In 2011, the Ottawa-based Pearson Centre carried out a [workshop](#) at CREOMPAZ about “police and military cooperation in peace operations.” Canada’s Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and the US Southern Command jointly funded the event. Soldiers trained at CREOMPAZ have been deployed as part of UN missions in Haiti and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

For some, like Ka’koj Ba Tiul, a Maya Poqomchi’ anthropologist and professor, CREOMPAZ has received an unwarranted facelift by rebranding the military base as a peacekeeping center.

“It is a school of assassins. The hidden side is the training of teams of military counterintelligence,” said Ba Tiul, who calls CREOMPAZ “the little School of the Americas.”

“There are instructors from Argentina, instructors from Chile, instructors from Colombia, instructors from North America, and instructors from Israel,” said Ba Tiul in an interview at his home just over a dozen kilometers from the base. “It is where they are training all of those who will form part of the modern counterinsurgency model for Guatemala and Central America.”