7/18/95

BACK FROM THE DEAD

Dianna Ortiz Was One of the Missing in Guatemala. She Has Only Now Found Her Voice.

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In January 1988 Dianna Ortiz, a young American nun teaching Mayan Indian children in Guatemala's western highlands, began to receive death threats. Almost two years later, on Nov. 2, 1989, she was abducted at gunpoint.

By the end of that year, she returned to her family in New Mexico—a fragile survivor of rape and torture at the hands of the Guatemalan security forces. She could remember nothing about her life before the assault—and even now has only partial recall.

Ortiz is not alone. That same year, 23-year-old human rights observer Meredith Larson, a Northern Virginia native, was viciously stabbed by two men in Guatemala City as she walked home from the bus after a labor federation meeting. In 1990, 24-year-old social worker and former D.C. resident Josh Zinner, who was working with homeless kids in Guatemala City, was assaulted by gunmen and dragged toward a waiting car before police finally intervened—only to release the assailants, who displayed military identifications.

Each went to Guatemala an idealist. Each came back changed, even damaged—their lives ruptured by encounters with Guatemalan justice. Few people cared what had happened to them. After spending their time working with poor people in an obscure, politically volcanic country, they were looked at with bewilderment by the America they returned to.

Yet those who came home knew they were the lucky ones. Others had died or disappeared.

Now the press and policy-makers who initially ignored these cases are giving them a second look. The reason: Jennifer Harbury, a Harvard-trained lawyer who'd been searching for her husband, Mayan guerrilla leader Efrain Bamaca Velasquez, who disappeared in 1992 after a firefight with the Guatemalan military.

Last winter, after being ignored by the Guatemalan and U.S. governments she was barraging with legal arguments, Harbury took to the media. That strategy—and two high-profile hunger strikes, including one outside the White House—paid off in March when she learned Bamaca had been killed about a year after his capture, and that a Guatemalan army colonel, who was a paid CIA informant, was involved in his murder.

In a perverse way, the news gave validity to the charges made by Ortiz, Larson, Zinner and several others. It gave them hope. So did a Boston judge's $47.5 million ruling this spring in favor of Ortiz and 11 Guatemalan nationals against a former Guatemalan defense minister—an award that is more symbolic than enforceable. And so did President Clinton's March 30 order directing the Intelligence Oversight Board to conduct a government-wide inquiry.

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GUATEMALA, From C1

But so far, the charges remain unproven and the principals continue to be frustrated.

Rep. Robert G. Torricelli (D-N.J.), a central figure in the Harbury case, puts the blame on "the cynicism of our times. . . . Idealism is out of fashion and clout is important. These people are not 'important.' They don't have clout."

But Ortiz is determined to persevere. "It would be easy to take a razor blade and slice my wrists," she says. "But I feel there was a reason I survived. I don't know why. Perhaps it was to talk about torture in Guatemala."

Back From the Brink

Dianna Ortiz sits ramrod straight at her desk—on guard in the presence of strangers. Next to her in the ramshackle house in Northwest Washington that is home to the Guatemala Human Rights Commission, a tape deck softly plays fiesta dance music. Whenever the tape finishes, she starts it again. "When I hear the music, I see the faces of the people, and I come back to life," she says.

Until recently she has not wanted to speak publicly about her case. But Harbury's example has emboldened her.

This is what the diminutive nun reports she endured in a single day after she was abducted and taken in a national police car from the back yard of a church retreat to a clandestine prison in Guatemala City:

Multiple instances of gang rape. One hundred and eleven cigarette burns on her back. Torture that involved being lowered into a open pit packed with human bodies and rats.

She also was threatened, repeatedly accused of being a whore and told that if she managed to survive, no one would believe her story.

Her ordeal was interrupted, she reports, only after a tall, fair-haired man she says was North American came into the interrogation room, cursed—in American-accented English—when he saw her and ordered her release. After quickly helping her dress, he told her he was taking her to a safe haven at the American Embassy. Terrified and convinced the man was driving her to her death, Ortiz escaped from his Jeep by jumping out at a stoplight in heavy traffic.

(Thomas Stroock, then U.S. ambassador to Guatemala, says the embassy exerted every effort to find Ortiz and to assist her when she reappeared, even though she declined its offers. "The insinuation that any member of the American mission to Guatemala was in any way connected with anything like the Dianna Ortiz incident is an insult," says Stroock, who is now a professor at the University of Wyoming.)

When Ortiz was reunited with her family in New Mexico and her sisters at the Ursuline order in Kentucky, she had no idea who they were. When they embraced her, she was overwhelmed with self-disgust—her only identity that of a woman who had been raped and tortured. "I was afraid I would contaminate them," she says. "Even now I am afraid to look in the mirror. I'm afraid I will see a monster."

Stripped of her memory of her life prior to her abduction, frightened by anything that reminded her of the torture—men with cigarettes, squirrels she mistook for rats—Ortiz was disoriented for many months.

Her initial attempts at recovery—first working as a teacher with the poor in Mexico, then as a patient at a psychiatric hospital in Kentucky—didn't work. Therapists encouraged her to talk, but for years she found that difficult. It wasn't until 1991 when she got to Chicago's Marjorie Kovler Center for the Treatment of Survivors of Torture that she began to recover. She stayed for two years and occasionally returns for weekends.

Ortiz's symptoms—extreme anxiety, depression, insomnia and severe memory loss—are typical of torture survivors, says Mario Gonzalez, the clinical supervisor of the Kovler Center. "The obvious result of the experience of torture is that of disorientation and confusion. . . . In order to protect itself and suppress those painful experiences that continue torturing even in the form of memories, the mind creates a kind of blockade."

Initially, says Ortiz, efforts to investigate what had happened to her seemed to spur a smear campaign against her. In Guatemala, for example, rumors surfaced that she'd staged her own kidnapping in a lesbian lovers' quarrel, and that the case couldn't be resolved because of her unwillingness to undergo extensive official questioning before leaving Guatemala. (She has since returned to Guatemala and provided material for a police sketch of the North American.)

She remains unrepentant about her behavior after escaping. "Who in their right mind would have gone to the U.S. Embassy or the national police?" she says.

American officials did not defend her actions. It was as though, she says, by working with Mayans, she had consorted with the enemy. "American citizens concerned about our country's policies reflecting concern for democracy and human rights were treated as nuisances or problems or pariahs by many," says Robert E. White, a former U.S. ambassador to El Salvador and former head of the Peace Corps for Latin America. "The idea, for example, that people would cast aspersions on Dianna Ortiz's sanity and would spread stories that she was some kind of lesbian is outrageous."

Last summer Ortiz moved to Washington to work at the Guatemala Human Rights Commission. She lives in a group house, where she met Harbury. Little by little, Ortiz has begun to trust friends and colleagues and to recover some of her memory. Occasionally she even goes to church—though not to confession. "God sometimes appears to be deaf and distant," she says.

When she learned of the multi-million-dollar victory in the Boston case early this spring, Ortiz of course was pleased, but says she doesn't expect to see the money. "It can never undo the physical or psychological damage," she says. "Our concern has never been one of revenge, but of justice."

Banding Together

Justice. It's a commodity in short supply for other survivors of physical assault in Guatemala, or for the relatives of those who didn't survive:

- Randy and Sam Blake, whose brother, freelance journalist Nick Blake, was in the mountains apparently trying to interview left-wing guerrillas when he and photographer Griffin Davis were killed by Guatemalan civil patrollers in 1985. Their remains were not located until 1992.
- Paul Joslin, a Christian Brother who served with James "Santiago" Miller before Miller was shot to death in front of the Indian school run by the order in 1982.
- John Wolfe, whose brother Peter, a Peace Corps volunteer and natural resources specialist assigned to a Guatemala City tourism agency, was murdered walking home from a party in 1983.
- James Woods, whose brother William, a Maryknoll priest working with land resettlement co-ops, died in a mysterious 1976 small plane crash that killed everyone aboard.
- Trish Ahern and Peter Kerndt, whose sister, Ann Kerndt, was killed in the same plane crash.
- Meredith Larson.
- Josh Zinner.
- Sky Callahan, a Texas filmmaker working in Guatemala City on a documentary detailing civil rights violations, who 11 days ago was dragged off a street, forced into a car, kicked, beaten and threatened with worse peril if he stayed in the country.

With Harbury and Ortiz, these are the members of Coalition Missing, a group of U.S. citizens who have joined forces in the hope of attracting greater attention than they would on their own. And, they say, in the extended hope of focusing world attention on the many, many more cases of missing or murdered Guatemalans. International human rights organizations estimate that 100,000 people have died in political violence in Guatemala's 34-year war against its indigenous rebels and another 40,000 have "disappeared."

"Priests and labor leaders—and anybody who stands for civilization and justice and elementary decency—have the most dangerous occupations in Guatemala," says former ambassador White.

'Ideological Fault Line'

Until recently, Guatemala wasn't on most Americans' screens. El Salvador and Nicaragua were different. In the 1980s, there was much debate about U.S. economic and military aid to El Salvador, where left-wing rebels were much stronger, and in Nicaragua, where the United States supported the contra rebels fighting the leftist Sandinista government. But the brutal war against a leftist insurgency in Guatemala was less familiar. Guatemala's human rights advocates were mostly ignored. And when stories of human rights abuses visited on sympathetic Americans trickled out, nobody paid much attention.

Not the media, not the policy-makers.

"The Guatemalan cases have tended to be ignored because there hasn't been that much of a Washington angle," says Carlos Salinas, Amnesty International America's program officer for Latin America and the Caribbean. "It's not like Salvador, which was the subject of intense debate. Things are arguably worse in Guatemala, but there's been no big debate."

The connections that did exist were covert. "The U.S. role in Guatemala has been there all along, but it lay hidden under a cloak," says Anne Manuel of the human rights organization Americas Watch. "You couldn't raise much indignation about U.S. policy because we didn't know what it was. If it had been more apparent, more attention would have been paid to U.S. government tax dollars funding murder in Guatemala."

What made U.S. policy apparent were the revelations about Harbury's husband. She had beseeched both the Guatemalan and U.S. governments for information about Bamaca for years. Convinced that world opinion was the only thing that would pressure the Guatemalans into telling her if he had been captured and killed or was still alive, Harbury began an open-ended hunger strike in the Central Plaza outside the palace in Guatemala City.

She was prepared to fast until death, she says, but, after 32 days, was persuaded by her attorney to return to the United States to speak with high-level members of the Clinton administration, who had finally agreed to see her. Four months later, still in the dark about her husband's fate, she undertook the higher-profile hunger strike—this time across from the White House in Lafayette Square.

On March 22, nearly two weeks into Harbury's fast, Rep. Torricelli informed her—and the world—that a U.S. government official had come to him with secret information that Bamaca had been executed in 1993, and had linked his death—and that of American innkeeper Michael DeVine—to a Guatemalan army colonel who had once been a paid informant for the CIA.

After Torricelli's bombshells, the members of Coalition Missing came to Washington to brief members of Congress and to urge hearings on U.S. government misconduct in Guatemala, sanctions and declassification of materials related to their cases. Since then, many wonder why their stories haven't gotten more attention.

One reason may be the taint of unknown motivation. Regardless of whether the Americans

BY DERRILL BAZZY

Dianna Ortiz, left, who was abducted in Guatemala in 1989, and Jennifer Harbury, whose guerrilla leader husband disappeared in 1992 after a firefight with the Guatemalan military.

involved went to Guatemala for political (read "left-wing") reasons, they were often seen that way. Like Harbury, who married a guerrilla commando.

Raymond Bonner, a former Latin American correspondent for the New York Times who left the paper for many years in a dust-up over questions about his personal politics, points to "an ideological fault line" with regard to Latin America. "Anybody who wrote or said anything like Jennifer did, or aligned in any way against Washington's policy, was redbaited," says Bonner, who recently returned to the Times. " 'Here [Harbury] is, consorting with a rebel. She must be a commie. How can we take her seriously? She can't be telling the truth.' I really do think it all comes out of the same mind-set that brought us McCarthy in the '50s."

Another problem, says Murray Fromson, director of the School of Journalism at the University of Southern California, where he has been focusing on Mexico and Central America for almost a decade, is "parachute journalism." "We only send people to places where there is action, so the subtleties get lost. . . . And we tend to rely on official sources. People tend to tell American journalists what they think we want to hear, what they think supports our own inclinations."

These days one can only wonder what those inclinations are. The CIA, which is currently involved in an internal investigation of its operations in Guatemala, is apparently trying to sort that out as well. Although the report will not be finished for another month or so, last month CIA Director John M. Deutch, in his first official report to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, said he was concerned about allegations that the agency was involved in human rights abuses in Guatemala and in activities there that violated U.S. policies.

So perhaps Harbury's activities, their aftermath and their coverage by the media have brought Guatemala into sharper focus. They have certainly helped give Dianna Ortiz the courage to lobby this summer for Senate hearings on her case.

"I don't think the public or the policy-makers can ignore other people's plight," says Amnesty International's Salinas. "What Jennifer has been able to do is put human rights—and the agony of people involved—on the map."

Says Meredith Larson: "Why are human rights looked at as a political and leftish issue? . It's really a fundamental issue of survival for people. Characterizing it as leftish is a way to diminish the situation. But I was stabbed in the chest. No matter what people's political beliefs, people should not be tortured. This all needs to stop."

What Harbury has not been able to do, however, is find her husband's body. At the end of June, she learned the probable whereabouts of his grave on a small military base in Western Guatemala, but has not gotten permission to search it for his remains. Defiantly standing by her side is Julio Arango Escobar, the special prosecutor assigned to the case (whose involvement has prompted death threats and gunshots aimed at his office).

"I'm just feeling real stubborn," Harbury said last week in a phone call from Guatemala City. "This case has lasted all these years. The army has not had to pay a penalty even once. I can leave and start my life over, but if they get away with this case, they will get away with anything, and no Guatemalans will ever be safe. I'm not leaving."