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Clinton Gives Apology for U.S. Role in Guatemala

■ **Central America:**
President says support for
rightists was wrong. He
also vows to push for end
to immigration laws
favoring those fleeing
leftist regimes.

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GUATEMALA CITY—Reflecting on the break in Central America's cycle of repression and revolution, President Clinton apologized Wednesday for U.S. support of the rightist regimes that ruled Guatemala for three decades.

He also promised "to do everything I possibly can" to eliminate discriminatory provisions in U.S. immigration laws that favor refugees from Cuba and Nicaragua over those who fled to the United States to escape right-wing governments in Guatemala and El Salvador that were supported by Washington.

"Our treatment of people from Central America should reflect what they suffered rather than who caused the suffering," the president said. "This is wrong, and we should change it."

Central American immigration to the United States, the region's dramatic shifts in politics and its dual hardships of poverty and repression were the focus of Clinton's day. On the third day of his Central American tour, he addressed the Legislative Assembly in San Salvador and then went on to Guatemala City, where residents reported to him on the nation's political progress.

The president's comments on immigration—a subject that has drawn increasing attention in Washington—were his most extensive in recent weeks.

His administration is nearing decisions on how to modify the provisions of 1997 legislation that granted amnesty to 150,000 Nicaraguans but required Salvadorans and Guatemalans to prove their hardship claims on a case-by-case basis. The law's architects viewed Nicaraguans largely as refugees from the left-wing Sandinista regime that ruled the country in the 1980s.

Some of those fleeing Central America in the 1980s, Clinton said Wednesday, were "hurt by soldiers, some harmed by rebels."

Promising "justice and fairness"

and laws "that are more even-handed," the president said the United States should treat people "equitably, whatever their country of origin."

Perhaps no development in Central America demonstrates the fledgling transformation taking place better than the publication last month of a report by a U.N. commission on Guatemala's 35-year civil war.

The panel said U.S. money and training supported the Guatemalan military, which it said committed "acts of genocide" against the indigenous Mayas, in a conflict in which 200,000 people died or disappeared. In its report, the commission confirmed that the CIA had aided the Guatemalan military during the conflict.

It stated that the CIA had trained troops who later tortured and killed civilians and that, into the 1980s, the U.S. government had encouraged Guatemalan leaders to sustain an unfair social and economic system that perpetuated the war. Guatemala was the last Central American country to sign a peace agreement, in December 1996.

"For the United States, 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 was wrong, and the United States must not repeat that mistake," Clinton said in his discussion with 10 Guatemalan citizens. The meeting took place in the National Palace of Culture, with Guatemalan President Alvaro Arzu at Clinton's side.

A less blunt acknowledgment by Clinton of the U.S. role in El Salvador's civil war was criticized by Francisco Lorenza, a deputy in that country's National Assembly.

"He blamed mostly the left and the right without clearly accepting the United States' responsibility as a sponsor of the war," said Lorenza, a member of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, a guerrilla movement that became a political party when El Salvador's war ended in 1992.

The president's four-day trip to

and Guatemala, which ends today at a summit between Clinton and Central American leaders, was built around his examination of programs providing relief from the horrors of tropical storm Mitch, which struck last fall, and the broader effort to rebuild Central American society after years of suffering due to assaults by right-wing death squads and leftist upheaval.

Immigration issues are at a boil in the United States. In addition to seeking shifts in the 1997 act giving preference to Cubans and Nicaraguans, the Clinton administration has let lapse a temporary plan that halted deportations of Salvadorans and Guatemalans for 60 days to avert the hardship that their arrival would have caused back home after the onslaught of Mitch.

An 18-month moratorium protecting Nicaraguans and Hondurans remains in force, however, because U.S. officials believe that their countries' economies would be less able to absorb their return.

The issue is among the most sensitive in the United States' often-troubled relations with the struggling nations of the isthmus.

Salvadoran President Armando Calderon Sol complained to Clinton that the differentiation of U.S. immigration policy was "creating unnecessary divisions" in the region, said Samuel R. "Sandy" Berger, Clinton's national security advisor.

Treatment of immigrants is a vital issue in El Salvador, which depends on remittances from migrants, who send home more than \$1 billion a year.

As he reviewed the turmoil that has marked the region's recent history, Clinton said Central America had suffered "man-made disasters far more cruel than anything nature can bestow on us."

"There was a time not long ago when many in this region believed they could only defend their point of view at the point of a gun, a time when civil war and repression claimed tens of thousands of lives and cast many thousands more into exile, a time when farmers were pushed off their land and children were torn from their parents, a time which provoked in the United States bitter divisions about our role in your region," he said.

"The wars are over," he said. "A battlefield of ideology has been transformed into a marketplace of ideas."

Gerstenzang reported from San Salvador and Guatemala City, and Darling from San Salvador.