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The cycle must stop

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The cycle must stop

Reports in recent years of thousands of Indians and Ladinos slaughtered in Guatemala and tens of thousands more fleeing their homes to refugee camps have provoked no outcry in the U.S. Popular resistance to an oppressive military regime is growing, yet President Reagan will ask to renew aid for the nation most notorious for human rights violations. This request should be denied and all support for this regime ended. The reasons should be clear when the Guatemala story is understood.

The Guatemalan guerrilla struggle, involving for the first time in Latin America large numbers of Indian people, comes out of an exploitative land tenure system exacerbated by an increasing U.S. corporate dominance of the economy. Large, mostly white-owned plantations (latifundios) in the fertile lowlands produce for export. Small plots (minifundios) of the Indians and poor Ladinos in the highlands provide subsistence crops to keep the peasants alive to work on the plantations.

Recent discoveries of oil in the northern

highlands have dispossessed thousands of Indians, driving them into the wage labor system and destroying their social system and culture. Conditions are ripe for civil war: two percent of over 7 million people own 70 percent of the cultivatable land; almost 30 percent urban unemployed, 90 percent of the rural population are illiterate, and 50,000 children die each year of malnutrition.

Against this background, the U.S. role has not been progressive. In fact, the CIA-backed coup of 1954 ousting reformist Jacobo Arbenz has been followed by three decades of repression responsible for the murder of over 90,000 people. Throughout, the United States has supported military dictatorships that have guaranteed protection for U.S. corporate interests by sending men and millions of dollars in military aid to help put down organized opposition. Reminiscent of Vietnam in the mid-1960s, Guatemalan armed forces were trained and led by U.S. military advisers who supplied napalm and sponsored "civic action" projects. By the late 1970s, however,

due to regular reports of human rights violations and massacres, the United States cut off aid to Guatemala, although the Reagan administration has since delivered millions of dollars of supposed "non-lethal" aid.

In response to their oppression, highland Indians formed an alliance with the poor Ladinos, and their struggle, coupled with renewed mass struggles in the cities, led to a new stage in the guerrilla war. The Rios Montt military regime reacted with a scorched earth campaign unprecedented in its ferocity. This genocidal anti-guerrilla campaign has had United States support and advice.

Tragically, the United States continues to ignore both the economic and social roots of the popular struggle and massacres of thousands of resisters. This repetitive cycle of United States foreign policy must stop. On Guatemala, it is time to speak out.

Julie Grab, Robert Mendoza and Steve Gray are members of the Maine Peace Action Committee.