

LAND and LIBERTY

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COVER PHOTO: Street kids bury a 13-year-old Nahaman Carmona Lopez, who was kicked to death by police in Guatemala City. Pictured: British-born Bruce Harris, the Latin American director of the US charity that aims to help the child victims of the war for control over land. Says Harris: "The least we can do is try to give these children time to play." - See Editor's Comment, this page.



Terrible legacy

IN GUATEMALA the police know how to deal with children of the streets who have been abandoned by their landless parents.

They kill them.

In Brazil, the police - or their licensed henchmen, the death squads - do the same, scouring the favelas for their little victims.

And in Argentina - during the days of the Junta - the generals who invaded the Falklands - the victims were called "disappeared".

But focus on Guatemala: the nature of the problem is identical in all cases.

THE BBC broadcast a TV documentary spotlighting the work of a US charity, Covenant House, which rescues waifs and strays.

Its Latin American director, Bruce Harris, is fighting a seemingly hopeless battle in Guatemala City, for the stream of street kids is endless.

These youngsters migrate from rural areas, the victims of an economic system that deprives their parents of the opportunity to earn a decent living. The economic stress causes social tensions, including the breakdown of families.

Which is why so many children survive by scavenging and petty crime. And when all else fails, there is always glue to sniff, a cheap anaesthetic against the pangs of hunger.

But the police do not care for these bands of wandering children. So they shoot them; or beat them to death. And have fun with them - pouring glue over the boys, prostituting the girls.

And since they are the agents of the law, people like Harris have a hard time persuading the authorities to punish the guilty men.

HARRIS is frustrated. He says: "The principal problem is that 80% of the land here is owned by 2% of the population. People cannot scrape a living, so they have to migrate to the urban centres.

Unless there is political change, justice will not exist."

An attempt was made to bring justice to Guatemala when President Arbenz expropriated one-fifth of the arable land and began distributing it to the landless.

The United Fruit Company was not happy with that, even though 85% of its land was kept idle as a matter of policy. Arbenz offered compensation on the basis of values declared for property tax purposes.

United Fruit refused compensation, for it had persistently understated the value of its land for tax purposes. The US State Department demanded that the compensation be increased from \$627,000 to \$16m - a rise in assessed land value from \$3 to \$75 an acre.

The CIA had a better idea: it backed the invasion that overthrew the Arbenz government in 1952. The landless Indian peasants were obliged to take to the hills. They have been dying ever since. Village-scale genocides have been documented by Amnesty International, but the landed elite's grasp on power remains undiminished.

But that has left a reminder of their terrible deeds: the street kids. Well, policemen are taking care of them.

The brutality and killing won't stop until Guatemalans develop a new philosophy of property rights. That means sharing the economic rent of land, the logic of which would be to give the tillers access to the soil.

It would also lead to a renewal of family life, and the kids would disappear from the streets: but this time, they would be safe at home with their parents.

None of this can happen, however, until there is also international agreement on the justice of share rights to land. Otherwise, how can we be sure that the CIA would not get involved again?

COMMENT by the Editor