

LASA urges the Government of Guatemala to guarantee the integrity of the Historical Archive of the National Police

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The Executive Council of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) views with grave concern the recent developments affecting the integrity of continued staffing and work at the Historical Archive of the National Police (Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional-AHPN) in Guatemala.

The protection and preservation of human rights were foundational in the creation of LASA in 1966 and have remained a guiding value in our members' scholarship and activism. Human rights are at stake in the current threat to the AHPN, as continued and unfettered access to its documents has been instrumental in providing information to the survivors and families of the victims of the armed forces during Guatemala's internal conflict. The UN Commission on Human Rights has defined principles for the protection of human rights and the prevention of impunity, which include specific obligations to states regarding the protection of archives, and the requirement to provide public access to archives for legal and historical purposes. The organizations supporting human rights, as well as the individuals accused of human rights violations, have the right to access the materials of the AHPN.

Similarly, freedom of inquiry is essential to LASA's mission as a professional organization. LASA's most fundamental goal is to foster intellectual discussion, research, and teaching on Latin America, the Caribbean, and its people throughout the Americas – a goal shared by the more than 12,000 members of this association. When access to research materials, such as those contained in the AHPN, is imperiled or curtailed in any way, we must speak out. The AHPN is used by our members for research, and has affiliations with U.S. academic institutions; in particular, the AHPN Digital Archive, a collaborative project with the University of Texas' Lozano Long Institute for Latin American Studies, Rapoport Center for Human Rights and Justice, and Benson Latin American Collection. Furthermore, access to historical documentation is not only valued by scholars but is also crucial for public debate. Thus, academic freedom, we maintain, is an essential aspect of freedom of expression, which is a fundamental right recognized under the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, to which Guatemala acceded in 1992.

About the Historical Archive of the National Police

Since its discovery in 2005, the AHPN has enabled Guatemalan citizens, scholars, and activists from around the world to consult its contents. Comprising more than 80 million documents that date between 1882 and 1996, the Archive's collection constitutes a unique and invaluable resource for Guatemala's historical memory, and for legal and scholarly use. Under the direction of Gustavo Meoño Brenner and a professional staff of archivists, the AHPN has painstakingly begun the long process of saving, restoring, and systematizing the materials of the National Police. In the 13 years since their discovery, about 21

percent of the materials have been digitized to insure their preservation and public access. The AHPN's materials provide the most important official source of information on the activities of the National Police and other state security forces during Guatemala's armed internal conflict, which took the lives of at least 200,000 Guatemalans, mostly civilians, between 1960 and 1996.

Yet recently, on August 3, 2018, the Ministry of Culture and Sports, which oversees the Archive, in conjunction with the United Nations Development Program in Guatemala, removed the AHPN's longtime director, Meoño Brenner, abruptly and without reasonable explanation or process. The remaining staff of about 50 people continue on temporary short-term contracts. These decisions appear to have been taken without establishing basic guidelines to transfer direction and insure continuity of professional work in the AHPN. As such, the actions taken this month threaten to jeopardize the ongoing and well-established work of the AHPN personnel.

These actions are particularly alarming in the current political climate in Guatemala, in which some lawmakers have called for a general amnesty regarding past human rights violations, and there have been public calls for the departure of the AHPN's director and for an end to its role in providing a basis for legal actions on behalf of human rights and the defense of justice.

Given the gravity of the AHPN's current situation and the uncertainty it implies for the continuity, openness, and integrity of the archive and its staff, the LASA Executive Committee calls for:

1. The resumption of the archive's work and accessibility, and return of all professional staff that had been working on organizing, analyzing, and digitizing the documents.
2. A guarantee of the inviolability of the information contained in the AHPN and the strict preservation of its document collection, while ensuring the continuation of all work processes in the Archive.
3. The continued openness, efficiency and cooperation with the institutions, organizations and individual users of the AHPN and of the Archive's various investigations, as well as its contribution to the right to truth and search for justice, at a minimum with the same level of commitment demonstrated to date.
4. The reactivation of the Advisory Boards, comprised of prominent individuals in academia, culture, and the defense of human rights, to accompany and professionally advise the work of the AHPN.

About LASA

The Latin American Studies Association (LASA) is the largest professional association in the world for individuals and institutions engaged in the study of Latin America. With over 12,000 members, over 65% of whom reside outside the United States, LASA is the one association that brings together experts on Latin America from all disciplines and diverse occupational endeavors, across the globe. LASA's mission is to foster intellectual discussion, research, and teaching on Latin America, the Caribbean, and its people throughout the Americas, promote the interests of its diverse membership, and encourage civic engagement through network building and public debate.

If you wish to interview a LASA Executive Council member, you can contact the LASA communications office at (412) 648-7929 or lasa@lasaweb.org.

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