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BODY:

Guatemala's vicious 36-year civil war ended a decade ago. Unfortunately, the bloodshed and rampant impunity have not. More than 5,000 murders are reported each year. Many are committed by the same groups -- both left and right -- that terrorized the country during the war but that now have gotten into organized crime, including drug and human trafficking.

Only a tiny fraction of these murders are ever investigated. Even fewer are brought to trial. At the request of Guatemala's government, the United Nations proposed creating a commission of experts to help investigate and prosecute these crimes.

The Guatemalan congress is expected to vote tomorrow on whether to accept the U.N.'s help. Unfortunately one powerful party, the Guatemalan Republican Front, or F.R.G. -- the party of the former dictator Efraim Rios Montt -- is fiercely opposed and looks as if it can muster the votes to block passage.

The proposed commission would do a lot more than just issue a report on what is going wrong in Guatemala. It would also help train police investigators and act as an auxiliary prosecutor, helping Guatemala's public prosecutors develop cases and see them through to the end. Guatemala's own police and judiciary are too terrorized or too corrupted by these rogue groups to go after the criminals on their own.

The Bush administration has rightly expressed its support for the U.N. commission. Many leading members of Guatemalan society, including the human rights groups and the minister of defense, are backing it as well. The F.R.G. claims that bringing in the U.N. commission would violate Guatemala's sovereignty. But the country's constitutional court has already ruled that it would not.

This raises the question: Who is F.R.G. trying to protect? Obviously, not Guatemala's citizens.

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