

Guatemala Apologizes to Cuba for Bay of Pigs

Guatemala president apologizes for country's letting CIA train exiles there for Bay of Pigs

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HAVANA February 17, 2009 (AP)

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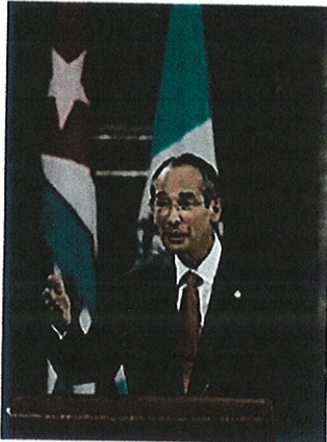
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Guatemala's President Alvaro Colom speaks during a conference at Havana's university Tuesday, Feb. 17, 2009. Colom is in Cuba on a three-day official visit. (AP Photo/Javier Galeano) (AP)

Guatemalan President Alvaro Colom apologized to Cuba on Tuesday for his country's having allowed the CIA to train exiles in the Central American country for the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion.

"Today I want to ask Cuba's forgiveness for having offered our country, our territory, to prepare an invasion of Cuba," Colom said during a speech at the University of Havana. "It wasn't us, but it was our territory."

He added that he wished to apologize "as president and head of state, and as commander in chief of the Guatemalan army."

About 1,500 Cuban exiles trained under CIA guidance in Guatemala before invading the island beginning April 17, 1961, in an unsuccessful bid to overthrow Fidel Castro's communist government.

The invasion ended after less than three days, with about 100 invaders killed and more than 1,000 captured by Cuban forces.

Colom, whose government is considered center-leftist, said he was asking Cuba's forgiveness as "a sign of solidarity and that times are changing," and to "reaffirm my idea that Latin America is changing."

At the height of the Cold War, the Guatemalan military government of Miguel Ramon Ydigoras Fuentes allowed the CIA to train an exile force in the rural province of Retalhuleu. Known as the 2506 Brigade and comprising mostly Miami-area Cuban exiles, the group was determined to overthrow Castro's government — which had brought the Soviet bloc closer than ever to the continental United States by seizing power in Cuba 28 months before.

The invaders landed at Playa Larga at the innermost part of the Bay of Pigs, on the southern coast of central Cuba. The fighting later moved south, to Playa Giron, where Castro's forces triumphed after less than 72 hours, when U.S. President John F. Kennedy failed to provide air support.

Colom said Tuesday that "Cuba deserves its own destiny, a destiny that you all built with this revolution of 50 years."

"Defend it," he said, referring to the guerrilla uprising that brought Castro to power on Jan. 1, 1959. "Defend it like you have always done"