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Page 51200  
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Dept of State, RPS/IPS, Margaret P. Grafeld, Dir.  
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CENTRAL AMERICAN HIGHLIGHTS

Guatemala: Political Violence Up (S/NF/NC/ORCON/EXDIS)

The rate of political assassinations and disappearances in Guatemala--which fell rather steadily for the past two years--is increasing again as the July 1 election nears. Given the traditionally violent nature of Guatemalan politics, it is likely that much of the incremental violence will originate with the right-wing political parties. The government--although not directly responsible for most political violence--has done virtually nothing to control or punish either the right-wing parties or its own personnel for engaging in such activities. If this does not change, Guatemala's slowly improving international image can be expected to sink back toward the low point of the Lucas Garcia era.

The traditional sources of political violence in Guatemala are many. Guatemalan guerrillas have regularly murdered the administrators of large farms (fincas), as well as military commissioners in rural villages. Government security services have employed assassination to eliminate persons suspected of involvement with the guerrillas or who are otherwise left-wing in orientation. Certain army commanders traditionally have fought the insurgents by kidnapping and murdering Indians and campesinos suspected of collaborating with them.

During the past several weeks a new wave of violence has begun in Guatemala. The leader of a new left-wing political party was murdered, the leader of a new right-wing party was shot at, a labor leader was abducted, a shooting victim was carried from a hospital emergency room--with an IV tube still in his arm--by 10 armed men, and numerous Indians were detained and never seen again.

The use of violence by right-wing political parties to intimidate or silence opposition--or as part of byzantine intrigues--is traditional in Guatemala. One party, the National Liberation Movement (MLN), in the past actually has referred to itself as "the party of organized violence." A splinter from the MLN, the United Anti-Communist Party (PUA), is similarly inclined. Clandestine reporting indicates that the leader of the recently organized left-of-center New Force party (FN) who was murdered last week was a victim of the PUA. He apparently had accepted a large bribe in exchange for bringing his followers over to the PUA, but had not delivered. The abducted labor leader--released unharmed several days later--had been kidnapped by the National Police, who have traditionally considered labor activists to be communists.

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5

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The incidence of government-condoned abuses was much reduced by Rios Montt--no priests were killed during his year and a half in power, compared with thirteen under the preceding government of Gen. Lucas Garcia. All abuses were not eliminated, however; e.g., the first four AID contractors were killed while Rios was president. The director of the notorious presidential intelligence service (archivos) under Rios now heads the MLN's "paramilitary arm."

There has been little indication that the Mejia government's use of political violence has increased significantly compared to that of his predecessor. It was even reported late last year that Mejia had ordered the archivos to stand down from all such activities. Nonetheless, Mejia's light hand on the reins--and, no doubt, his reputation for condoning such activities--appear to have permitted some backsliding by elements of the security services.

There is reason to believe that the Guatemalan government finally may be beginning to understand that it need not deal with suspected subversives in an "all-or-nothing" fashion. Last week the Department of Technical Investigations (DIT) of the National Police--which, with the archivos, traditionally has been involved in "extra-legal" activities--admitted it was holding 86 kidnap victims and published their names in the press. It also released two kidnap victims after questioning. Although due process obviously has a long road to travel in Guatemala, it is promising to see that at least 86 of the disappeared persons are alive, and that two were released. In the past, the fate of innocent kidnap victims was usually the same as that of the guilty.

The Guatemalan army is, for the most part, committed to the use of civic action as a major part of its counter-insurgency operations, and in most areas wide-spread abductions have not been reported for the past year. Nonetheless, there is a disturbing pattern to the reports that have been received indicating that certain individual commanders--particularly Col. Hernandez Catalan of Huehuetenango--continue to abduct, torture, and murder Indians, campesinos, and USAID-funded bi-lingual education personnel as a routine method of combatting the insurgency.