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From : INR - Thomas L. Hughes *TLH*
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Guatemalan counter-insurgency operations against the extreme left during the past year have been so successful that the US Embassy reports "insurgent combat involving organized guerrilla units is not a current threat to stability in any region of the country." This success has come about through a combination of overt and covert operations by the Guatemalan security forces and right wing civilian associates and auxiliaries to stamp out the insurgents. The methods employed, particularly on the covert side, have resembled those of the guerrillas themselves: kidnappings, torture, and summary executions. President Mendez Montenegro evidently gave the security forces a carte blanche in the field of internal security in exchange for military support for his administration. He may now wish to reconsider, however, as military use of extra-legal tactics is creating considerable unease in Guatemala and threatens to undermine his popular support. The Embassy warns that continued use of such rough and ready counter-insurgency tactics could lead to popular agitation for the re-establishment of law and order, and eventually might create conditions propitious for a coup.

The toll of the "White Terror." The extremely fluid nature of the situation in Guatemala makes accurate tabulation of the victims of counter-terrorism difficult. Nevertheless, rough estimates indicate that approximately 500-600 persons have been killed during the past year; with the addition of "missing" persons this figure might double to 1,000-1,200. A separate tabulation of terrorist incidents during the period

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December 1966-September 1967 totals 637. While many of these were undoubtedly the work of the leftist insurgents, a large number resulted from over-zealous clandestine counter-insurgent activities by the security forces and their associates. In recent weeks most of the incidents reported appeared to fall into the latter category.

Assignment terror:the Army's Special Unit. At the center of the Army's clandestine urban counter-terrorist apparatus is the Special Commando Unit formed in January 1967, and currently under the command of Colonel Maximo Zepeda. Composed of both military and civilian personnel, the Special Unit has carried out abductions, bombings, street assassinations, and executions of real and alleged communists, and occasionally has also acted against other vaguely defined "enemies of the government. The Special Unit supposedly does not act without specific orders from Col. Zepeda, who in turn receives his instructions from the Defense Minister, Colonel Arriaga Bosque. The Special Unit presently collaborates with the Fourth Corps of the National Police, which conducts similar operations. For a time the Special Unit also worked with leaders of the MANO BLANCA, a right wing terrorist organization formed in mid-1966 to try and prevent President Mendez from taking power. The MANO fell into disfavor with the Army, however, and members of the Police Fourth Corps were reportedly responsible for the murder of MANO extremist leader Jorge "Huevo Loco" Cordova Molina.

Other clandestine Army counter-insurgency activities (including propaganda, psychological warfare, and fund raising to finance paramilitary forces) have been conducted under the guise of several fictitious anti-communist front organizations like NOA, CADEG, CRAG, and RAYO.¹

¹For more on the MANO, see Intelligence Note 367, "Guatemala: Vigilantism Poses Threat to Stability," May 12, 1967 (~~SECRET/NO FOREIGN DISSEM/LIMDIS~~).

Rural counter-insurgency: apolitical power? Civilian counter-insurgency groups armed and organized by the military, are also active in rural Guatemala--particularly in the jurisdiction of Colonel Carlos Arana, commander of the Zacapa Military Brigade. Most of these groups are recruited from among militantly anti-communist followers of the rightist National Liberation Movement (MLN). The Army says it has approximately 1,800 armed civilians under its control, but other armed groups are known to be operating semi-independently. These groups have long been a source of concern to rural members of President Mendez' Revolutionary Party (PR), who have complained of persecution and who fear that reported rightist/military plans to expand these groups are motivated by partisan political considerations. The armed civilians are also a source of potential power for ambitious rightists and military men. The groups in Zacapa, for example, display a strong personal loyalty to the controversial Col. Arana, and their leaders have indicated a willingness to fight on his behalf should the government fall through on its oft-rumored intention to replace him. The Army has thus far apparently kept these groups under fairly tight control, but any move to disband or disarm them could cause considerable trouble.

Mendez or the military: who's in charge? In addition to "known" communists and communist sympathizers, the clandestine counter-insurgency groups (both urban and rural) have threatened and acted against an alarmingly broad range of Guatemalans of all social sectors and political persuasions. Labor leaders, businessmen, students and intellectuals, government officials, and politicians have all been included at various times on the "target lists" of the clandestine "anti-communist organizations." The President of Congress has privately said that all PR deputies have received threats,

and it was recently alleged that the planned assassinations of four PR Congressmen threatened by CADEG had been "postponed" at the request of Col. Zepeda, head of the Army Special Unit.

This situation brings into serious question the ability of President Mendez, the government, or even the Minister of Defense to control the activities of the counter-insurgents. Mendez may indeed have given a carte blanche to the military on internal security matters in the interests of survival, but it is doubtful that he can remain quiescent much longer in the face of accumulating evidence that the counter-insurgency machine is out of control. We find persuasive the Embassy speculation that "in some instances the government can still exercise a degree of control over the activities of the clandestine killer units, both civilian and military," but that it would "be foolhardy to count on it." Mendez may shortly discover, if he has not already done so, that survival can have too high a price. If the mass of politically articulate Guatemalans become convinced that a constitutionally elected government cannot guarantee individual rights and assure law and order, they may begin to look for an alternative that can--either to the right or left, depending upon their individual political orientation. There is some evidence to suggest that Guatemala's communists--ironically the original targets of the "white terror"--are beginning to sense future opportunities from precisely this situation.