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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

PARTICIPANTS: Moises (LNU), Comalapa farmer
Rafaela (LNU), Comalapa schoolteacher
Teofila (LNU), Comalapa student
Arnold M. Isaacs, Political Officer

DATE & PLACE: January 28 1981
Ruby Restaurant, Guatemala City

SUBJECT: "Reign of Terror" in Comalapa,
Chimaltenango Department

COPIES TO: CHARGE POL-3 USICA ECON ARA/CEN/G
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The three informants were introduced to the reporting officer by

[redacted] in Comalapa in the late 1970's and has many friends there. The three are all Indians. They would not reveal their last names. The women wore native dress. The purpose of the meeting was to enable the reporting officer to gain "first hand" understanding of the violence in Comalapa, a once tranquil and prosperous Indian town 1-1/2 hours west of Guatemala City.

Rafaela, who did most of the talking, said she believed the atmosphere of terror began with the abduction-death of Nehemias CUMEZ, one-time director of Vivienda Popular, in March (?) 1980. Since then some 30 people have been killed. There is no clear pattern. Some have been Reconstruction Committee (i.e., government) promotores; others seem to have been associated with Cumez in one way or another. (Note: Even government officials concede that Reconstruction Committee personnel have been victims of rightwing violence.) Most came out of the better educated and more modern segment of the community -- especially those belonging to the Catholic Church congregation which split off from the traditionalists some years ago.

Teofila's father had been killed one week earlier. Intruders, with faces covered, forced their way into the house late at night, dragged him outside to the rear of the house, and blew off his head. Police did not arrive until 8 in the morning. Teofila said her father had no political involvement. He had, however,

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received a warning "not to attend any more meetings." So far as she knew her father attended no meetings whatsoever. He was a former military commissioner who tried to distance himself from any political associations once the killings started.

The reporting officer asked whom they thought responsible for the killings. One responded, "The judiciales" (the term used for plainclothes police). Another said the Army. Were these one and the same in the local context? There was difference of opinion. Rafaela said the Army detachment which had been stationed in a tent encampment for the past 8 months or so on the outskirts supposedly patrols in the town for "the protection" of the townspeople. There is an informal curfew beginning at 6 PM. If so, she reasoned, how was it that so many murders can occur with apparent impunity if the Army itself is not involved?

Does anyone complain to the authorities? They agreed that no one does. There is simply too much fear. He who complained would be a marked man, was the general feeling. They insisted that there is no guerrilla activity in the Comalapa area. They had no knowledge of the purported guerrilla attack on an Army truck in an aldea of Comalapa earlier in the month. (We subsequently learned that the ambush took place closer to the town of San Martin Jilotepeque). They conceded that Cumez might have been associated with the Campesino Unity Committee (CUC), a peasant organization once active in Chimaltenango Department which has been underground for at least a year. They said that contrary to some impressions, there was no ORPA activity in their area. Until Cumez was abducted, murders were unheard of in Comalapa, where everyone has his own land and social constraints kept common crimes well within bounds.

The reporting officer asked if they had concrete evidence of Army involvement in the killings. They cited two examples: The case of a person taken off a Chimaltenango-Comalapa bus, and later killed, by purported guerrillas dressed in olive drab. Passengers noticed that at least one wore the laced boots characteristic of military. Also there is an Army checkpoint at the entrance to the town. Soldiers collect personal documents there and take them "behind a tree" to check names against lists they are seen to carry.

The three agreed there is no set modus operandi in the killings. One woman was strangled; another beaten to death. Many, of course, were shot, often but not exclusively by automatic weapons. Bodies of Comalapa residents frequently turned up outside of the town -- nearby Sumpango, Zaragoza and Los Aposentos and some as far away as Guatemala City. Others are found at the scene of the killing. Some are tortured; some not.

They believed that the situation in Comalapa was of a piece with the terror in other Indian towns of Chimaltenango Department -- San Martin Jilotepeque and San Jose Poaquil, among others -- but worse in Comalapa which was becoming something of a ghost town.

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An exodus of students and school teachers had virtually closed down the secondary school. Farmers were leaving their land and seeking work in Guatemala City. All three of them have left Comalapa for the duration. Moises considered himself in hiding ever since unidentified people came to his house looking for him. He said he could not imagine why.

[redacted] who introduced the three offered the speculation that the situation was the combination of Army overreaction built on the bad information served up by local informers in order to settle scores or to get control of land. The three neither accepted nor rejected this hypothesis. He said he could probably put together a list of 40 persons killed in Comalapa since early 1980, only a few of whose names had reached the media.

Postscript: A February 10 Army bulletin reported the detonation that day of a Claymore mine one kilometer from the entrance to Comalapa. It damaged an Army supply vehicle and wounded four soldiers. Supposedly the attackers fled without further engagement.

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