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UN Criticizes Human Rights Abuses and Military Budget

by LADB Staff

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In a report released this month, the UN Mission to Guatemala (MINUGUA) criticized the administration of Guatemalan President Alfonso Portillo, of the conservative Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG), for failing to investigate and punish the perpetrators of human rights violations. MINUGUA has also criticized the Guatemalan legislature for increasing military spending, in violation of the 1996 Peace Accords. MINUGUA's report features only the latest in a series of criticisms that UN representatives have directed at the Portillo government.

In May, a UN special human rights rapporteur who carried out a five-day investigation in Guatemala concluded that clandestine armed groups were making threats and committing abuses against human rights defenders and other social activists (see NotiCen, 2002-06-27). The UN representative, Hina Jilani of Pakistan, said credible evidence linked clandestine groups to the army and national police. MINUGUA, which is in charge of monitoring the implementation of Guatemala's peace process, reports that between July 2001 and June 2002 human rights violations in Guatemala rose dramatically.

The report cites ongoing police brutality, vigilante justice, and a failure to completely deactivate former violent paramilitary groups that were used to fight guerrillas during the country's 36-year civil war. The MINUGUA report calls upon the government to increase budgets for police, human rights enforcers, and prosecutors and to deactivate the presidential security force, which has been linked to human rights abuses in the past.

Call for compensation for war victims and their families

MINUGUA supports a recent proposal put forth by human rights groups calling on the Guatemalan government to compensate the families of the 200,000 people killed during the civil war. The measure would allocate nearly US\$400 million over the next 11 years for family members of those killed or for survivors whose human rights were violated during the fighting. The would-be law apportions US\$9 million to create a National Compensation Commission. Beginning in 2003, the commission would determine who would be eligible to be compensated for atrocities committed during the war and how the money would be distributed. The measure, which will be considered by Congress, could run into obstacles.

Efraín Ríos Montt, former de facto president and the founder of the FRG, heads the legislature. The FRG controls 63 of the 113 seats in Guatemala's unicameral legislature. During the Ríos Montt's 18 months in power between 1982 and 1983, Ríos Montt orchestrated a scorched-earth campaign that led to more than 200 massacres of civilian populations (see Update, 1991-03-06). UN verification team criticizes increase in military budget MINUGUA has also criticized the Guatemalan government for continuing to spend too much public money on the military.

Tom Koenigs, director of MINUGUA, criticized Guatemala's legislature for awarding the military an additional US\$33.1 million in recent weeks, bringing the armed forces' budget to around US\$160 million for this year. "There is no reason to have a wartime budget because there is no war, and, besides that, nobody wants to return to the times of violence," says Koenigs, a German national who has headed the UN mission since August. MINUGUA has plainly stated that the increase in the military budget is contrary to the 1996 peace accords.

Those accords stipulate that the military budget is not to exceed .66% of GDP; with the recent addition, the current military budget represents .68% of GDP. Mario Polanco of Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (GAM), a human rights group, says that the increase in military spending threatens the peace accords and violates democratic principles. MINUGUA has pointed that, while the legislature increases the military budget, Guatemalans lack basic services in health, education, and public safety.

Legislative Deputies Nineth Montenegro, of Alianza Nueva Nacion, and Alfredo Cojti, of Partido de Avanzada Nacional (PAN), also criticized the new military expenditures. Cojti said that, while such money should be invested in health, education, and infrastructure, the increase in the military spending could not be defeated because of the FRG's majority control of the legislature.

UN calls for continued role for UN verification team

In view of the continuing problems in Guatemala's peace process, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has called for a continued role for MINUGUA, which has overseen the peace process for eight years. "In recent months the deterioration in compliance with obligations in the area of human rights and the fact that sufficient resources have not been assigned to sectors like public safety, justice, education, and health have been cause for ever greater concern to me," Annan said.

Mario Antonio Sandoval, a columnist for the Guatemalan daily Prensa Libre, says MINUGUA's mission should be extended "for at least one more year." Sandoval said one additional reason that the country needs the UN verification is that 2003 is an election year. "There is no reason to doubt that the government will utilize all sorts of pseudo-legal tricks to keep itself in power," says Sandoval. Sandoval said human rights are not only violated with physical aggression or assassination but also through the "immoral use of institutions like the Corte de Constitucionalidad, the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE), and the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ). Sandoval accuses the TSE of failing to stop the ruling FRG from illegally campaigning in public schools

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