

7-24-2003

Violence Erupts in Guatemala

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Violence Erupts in Guatemala." (2003). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9118>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Violence Erupts in Guatemala

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Guatemala

Published: 2003-07-24

Embattled former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt returned to form on July 21, when he made statements to the press that were little more than calls to violence from his supporters. Frustrated by a Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) decision that overturned a victory given him by the Corte Constitucional (CC) in ruling that he could run for president despite a Constitutional ban (see NotiCen, 2003-07-03), Ríos told the press that the discontent of his followers over the reversal could lead to political violence in the country.

The General had every intention of resuming his campaign on Monday, but the CSJ on Sunday issued an injunction preventing the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) from following the procedure that would make him an official candidate. The injunction was temporary, but will force Ríos back to the CC for relief. Public repudiation of the CC decision last week, and the unusual, perhaps fraudulent, manner in which the CC manipulated its membership in order to arrive at a decision favorable to the Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG), leaves some doubt that Ríos will prevail even then. Two minority parties sought the injunction.

Alvaro Colom, candidate of the Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza, one of those parties, reacted to Ríos' rhetoric, saying, "The FRG is playing with fire and could give rise to violent acts because Ríos Montt doesn't accept that the Constitution prohibits him from being a candidate." Ríos said his party would obey the CSJ, "but we are reaching a point that could get out of our control." He pressed on, "With much sorrow I would like to argue that there will be moments in which probably [the demonstrations of his followers] will get out of the control of the national executive committee of the FRG."

Surprising no one, on July 24, Ríos' prediction became a reality: Two bomb threats emptied the Palacio de Justicia and the Torre de Tribunales. After receiving calls at around 8:30 in the morning, CSJ President Carlos Laríos ordered the immediate abandonment of the buildings, saying, "Today there will be no trials, but we don't know about tomorrow." About 2000 people worked in the buildings. The threatening calls came while FRG sympathizers were demonstrating throughout the capital. One of those demonstrations was taking place at the Centro Empresarial, where demonstrators burned tires. Masked demonstrators carried weapons, including firearms and machetes. Another demonstration broke out at the Obelisco, in the southeast part of the city, and police left the scene.

Director of the television news program Libre Encuentro Dionisio Gutiérrez said, "It looks to me like a provocation, its shameful to hear deputy Aristides Crespo wash his hands of this," in reference to the FRG leader's saying that the party had no responsibility in the manifestations. Crespo had earlier said on a radio broadcast, "What is happening right now is foreign to the FRG; we are not responsible for what is happening in the streets." A reporter died, apparently of a heart attack, while

running from the mobs. Others were beaten, at different locations where the demonstrations had gone wild.

In San Lucas, two Guatevision reporters were doused with gasoline, but escaped being torched, and in the capital, a radio reporter was accosted and his motorcycle destroyed. Casting further doubt on Crespo's denials, the demonstration at the Obelisco was led by the Consejo Nacional de la Juventud (CONJUVE), whose president is Juan Pablo Rios, the General's grandson.

Human rights ombudsman Sergio Morales held the FRG government of President Alfonso Portillo responsible for the chaos. He told reporters, "We have contacted the Organization of American States (OAS) and are trying to get our denouncement to the United Nations because we cannot allow these premeditated and organized acts to pass unnoticed." He said that despite having communicated with the government ministry since the beginning of the events, police presence had been minimal.

The UN Mission for Guatemala, Minugua, called the situation "critical." "The situation is very critical. We reiterate the call against violence to the political parties, and a return to a peaceful campaign," said Minugua spokesperson Seda Pumpyanskaya. She also lamented the death of the reporter, Hector Ramirez, telling the press, "We are in solidarity with the press which is a key institution for the functioning of a democratic society." Pumpyanskaya emphasized that the Minugua statement was aimed particularly at the FRG.

Churches also called for calm. Said Monsignor Rodolfo Quesada Toruno, long experienced in the peace process and well acquainted with the potential for violence in his country, "I'm very worried because when the situation heats up, neither the police nor the army are going to be able to control it. I lament the death of the journalist and make a call that this electoral path does not become a path of blood." Representative of the evangelical churches, Vitalino Ximilox held the FRG responsible. "They must respect what the law says; the solution is not to persecute journalists," he said.

Late reports said that all reserve units of the Policia Nacional Civil had been put on "red alert" and had been deployed to hot spots where groups of campesinos that had been bussed into the capital by the FRG had congregated. They had orders to act only in cases of disruption of public order or damage to private property.

-- End --