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## Guatemalan Army to Shrink

by LADB Staff

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The Guatemalan Army will soon be a lot smaller. Reports differ on the size of the cuts, but the budget, number of bases, and troop strength will shrink on the order of from one-third to one-half.

"This unprecedented historic act consists of the beginning of the substantial modernization and transformation of the Army of Guatemala, to adapt it to the new times of peace," said President Oscar Berger. Speaking at a ceremony before an audience of high-ranking military officers and members of the international diplomatic corps, Berger said that, prior to June 30, the armed forces would be reduced to 15,500 troops from the present 23,000, an approximate 35% reduction. The military budget will be fixed at 0.33% of GDP from now on. "The times of armed conflict are, definitely and fortunately, things of the past, so the Army needs a different conception of its functions," said the president.

The ceremony was convened at the National Palace of Culture for this announcement. Berger staked out his place in history just a few months after his Jan. 9 inauguration when he declared the end of institutional violence as an instrument of political power. Berger is the first president in recent history to even dare to speak in public of a proposal like this, but he said he felt no fear of reprisals from the military, and he tried to lay to rest any fears in the audience that this initiative would compromise the governability of the country (see NotiCen, 1998-02-05).

Retired Gen. Otto Perez Molina, Berger's presidential commissioner for defense and security, said troop strength would be reduced by 12,109 through a combination of voluntary retirement and elimination of positions. Bases will be reduced to five Peten, Huehuetenango, Suchitepequez, Jutiapa, and Guatemala City. Defense Minister Cesar Augusto Mendez Pinelo said committees would be formed to decide what to do with decommissioned military assets, including but not limited to the munitions factory, the Escuela Politecnica, and the Adolfo V Hall military school.

The cost of the massive demobilization will be about US\$50 million. About US\$37.5 million will go for severance pay. Berger said this "should be viewed as an investment." The overall military budget will be cut from US\$118.7 million to US\$97.5 million and is scheduled to fall to 0.33% of GDP by 2005. For 2003, GDP was US\$3.09 billion. In 2001, during the just concluded presidency of Alfonso Portillo (1999-2004), military spending reached 0.94% of GDP. Politically important, but questions remain

Independent analyst and security expert Bernardo Arevalo called the reduction politically important and noted that, while he has not had the opportunity to review the plan in detail, it very obviously goes beyond the merely cosmetic, but much remains unanswered. He said that, apart from size and budget, it is still necessary to determine how the Army's "theory of conflict," its structure, deployment, doctrine, educational system, all respond to genuine defense needs of the country. "The government has decided, in this case, to start with the establishment of new parameters

in budget and troop strength," Arevalo said. "Now it will be necessary to confront, in an urgent manner, the subject of what, how, and where resources will be applied to build a functional military force for a democratic state."

Turning to the sociopolitical context, Arevalo said that globalization does not bring with it a tendency toward the disappearance of armies, but rather a redefinition of civil and military security needs of countries. In Guatemala, that means adaptation to a democratic state and response to security needs emerging from the new international environment brought about by the trade and integration deals to which it is party. Shrinking the army has other implications.

Underemployment and unemployment are endemic to the country. Berger admitted that "the possibility exists" for demobilized soldiers to become involved in crime, both organized and not, but he said he had confidence "in the principles and values of the members of the military" to avoid that. Confidence of this kind has no known historical basis. The Guatemalan Army is world famous for its criminality. The reduction in force that accompanied the peace process destabilized drug rings, international car theft organizations, and smuggling organizations as their leaders came out from under the authority of the Army and entered private practice (see NotiCen, 2003-11-06).

Keep them from crime by making them cops Berger said that some of the discharged soldiers would have the opportunity to enter the national police academy and join civilian security forces. The president also anticipates that the business community will step forward "to help them identify productive activities in which they can participate with the good severance payments they will receive." Here again, the president's confidence in the Guatemalan economy's capacity to absorb the soldiers into the work force may be misplaced.

From the perspective of the UN Mission in Guatemala, MINUGUA, the reduction represents the most significant change for the Guatemalan army in decades, and in line with the now overdue requirements of the provisions of the Peace Accords of 1996 that MINUGUA is in the country to monitor. MINUGUA spokesperson Marie Okabe said the new military budget would liberate funds for education, health, and public security. This, too, may be misplaced confidence; there are few funds to free. Hugo Maul, member of the Comision Tecnica del Pacto Fiscal (CTPF), said on April 12 that the government needs to cut spending even further.

The CTPF is a presidential committee charged with finding a solution to the problem of public finance by April 30. The CTPF has to find more than US\$1 billion to fill the "hole" in the budget. To avoid "dramatic" consequences, said the economist, the Berger government must "prioritize, rationalize, and reduce public spending. Just as was done with the Army, so with the social funds." The situation will soon come to a head, said Maul, and "the government could confront cash-flow problems in May and not have resources to pay worker's salaries."

To this sorry assessment must be attached an addendum. Although the budget will technically decline from US\$118.7 million to US\$97.5 million, according to Otto Perez Molina, US\$50 million must be added for retirements, over and above the 2004 budget. And in 2005, although the budget ought to be about US\$100 million, another US\$31.3 million will be added for "the process of modernization." Nor is that the final word on the matter.

Military analyst retired Lt. Col. Mauricio Lopez warned that it is necessary to "wait and see how the process evolves, because now it is all confused." If a smaller Guatemalan Army is not destined to have a decisive fiscal effect, it must at least have a salutary influence on the country's social-justice deficit, Nobel laureate Rigoberta Menchu insisted. The 1992 peace prize recipient, now ambassador of good will in the Berger government, said, "The social groups must demand that the violators be judged."

Her call resonated with that of the Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado, whose director Nery Rodenas said, "This reduction, which is pro forma but not fundamental, concerns us because it should have reduced the number of commissioned officers and purged those who violated human rights or were involved in other crimes." The report of the Comision de Esclarecimiento Historico (CEH), produced by the archdiocesan office and funded by the UN, has concluded that the Army was culpable in 93% of the crimes and 623 of the massacres committed during the 36 years of war that began in 1960. But rather than being held accountable, many of the guilty will receive hefty severance packages.

The CEH recommended the establishment of a commission to examine the conduct of officers active during the war, "with the objective of adopting administrative measures for their purging" in 1999. Berger's response was, "If someone has something to pay for, there are the courts."

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