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## Guatemalan Army Set To Regress To Darker Times

by LADB Staff

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The Guatemalan Army's modernizing program is being hijacked by US interests, according to recent reports. The US wants the Army to focus on internal security, as it did during the 36-year civil war. The specter of such a policy reversal has kindled fear in many quarters of the return of repression, crimes against humanity, and a militarized society, all in the service of the US war on terrorism and drug trafficking.

Taking away the Army's mandate to turn upon its own people seemed essential at the time of the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996, but now President Oscar Berger is squeezed by the needs of the global superpower on one side (see NotiCen, 2005-03-31) and the virtual uselessness of the Policia Nacional Civil (PNC) on another. On a third side, joint military-police patrolling is a near-traditional response in times of disorder.

Illustrative of the inadequacy of the PNC, on May 22 four people were incinerated and two burned nearly to death when a local mob set them afire in the tiny village of Cruz Chich, municipality of Joyabaj, in the department of Santa Cruz de Quiche, alleging they were a band of highway robbers. Police responding to the mayhem were stopped in their tracks by as many as 5,000 machete- and club-wielding people who prevented them from intervening.

Said PNC officer Faustino Sanchez, "We were trying to dialog with the community, but there was no way. One of the community leaders who wanted to stop the crime was even accused of being on the side of the police, and they threatened to lynch him too. All was in vain; while we were talking with them, others were burning [the victims] alive." The victims were accused of having assaulted two local residents who had just returned from working in the US.

A week before this, on May 13, two other alleged criminals were incinerated alive under similar circumstances in Las Cruces, Joyabaj. This is the sort of event that could tempt a president to shore up a deficient constabulary with an army. But to do so would mask the fact that the state has failed to extend itself and all its institutions to the far reaches of its territory.

Still, military expert and political analyst Hector Rosada is among those who consider that the only option for civil security lies with the Army providing support for the PNC. Rosada acknowledges that the Army is stuck in a critical stage of reform dating from the dismissal by former President Alvaro Arzu (1996-2000) of those members of the Army responsible for signing the Peace Accords.

Rosada recalled that, following the first eight of eleven phases of the reform process, Arzu stopped it dead with his dismissals, and it never regained its momentum under his successor, former President Alfonso Portillo (2000-2004). Frozen in mid-reform Berger has inherited an army frozen in mid-reform, with the result that even with the further reductions he has ordered paring the force down to a third the size it was at war's end there is still substantial corruption within the ranks.

Iduvina Hernandez, director of Seguridad en Democracia (SEDEM), points out that the personnel reduction has not resulted in a budget reduction. The 2005 budget exceeds that of the year before, and the Army freely spends over budget with impunity. This is interpreted by many analysts as a return to a time when the army could disregard civilian budgetary constraints. The return is made possible by the army's agreeing to the US Security Agenda for the Americas, rather than an investment in new technology, as the government contends.

The US Security Agenda stems from the March 23, 2005, meetings of the presidents of Mexico, the US, and Canada, wherein the Security and Prosperity Partnership of Northern America (SPPNA) was established. On March 27, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld met with Berger.

According to Central America Report, they discussed terrorism and drug issues. Immediately following the meeting, Berger appointed a new drug czar (fiscal antinarcocticos) and a new chief of the seriously discredited Servicio de Analisis e Informacion Antinarcoctica (SAIA). He also announced the creation of police-patrol brigades and an agreement with the presidents of Honduras and El Salvador to create a regional force to fight youth gangs and organized crime.

Gustavo Meono, director of the Fundacion Rigoberta Menchu Tum (FRMT), a sharp critic of the Army, pegged these events as a guarantee that Guatemala is obeying US security dicta and that the US has returned to a belief that the best way to strengthen failed states is to restructure their armies. Meono anticipates that the Army will take on a role more like a national guard, with a resurrected internal mandate. It would be responsible for fighting drug trafficking, corruption, and illegal immigration.

### *Old guard still controls the Army*

This scenario pits the new Army against the old Army, in the sense that those officers and troopers allegedly kicked out for these very crimes have since taken their activities private. These former officers are still very much in control of the Army. Many analysts agree that, despite official retirement, they exert even more power than do the present general staff. This arrangement suggests that the Army is now in position to follow the strategic aims of the US without in the least jeopardizing the interests of the parallel powers (see NotiCen, 2004-09-30).

Longtime students of the rise of Latin American militarism readily recall that, before terrorism and drugs, anti-communism was the impetus for US support of unrestrained armed forces. For those students, it will be an indication of just how far the world has come to find that Russia, in the person of its Ambassador to Guatemala Valery Nikolayenko, has offered Russian aid in modernizing the Guatemalan Army. In making the offer, the ambassador's rhetoric is indistinguishable from that of the US. "We have always supported disarmament, and our position, above all in places where this has been a problem, is to support policies that promote it," said Nikolayenko. "The modernization of the Army of Guatemala is something that has been taken as a given since the signing of the Peace Accords. Nevertheless, the only thing that has been done is the reduction of [the Army]. Now, new threats like narcotraffic and delinquency must be confronted."

Guatemala first established relations with Russia April 19, 1945, when the then Soviet ambassador to the US Andrei Gromyko first exchanged diplomatic credentials with then Guatemalan charge d'affaires Enrique Lopez Herrarte. In February 1995, Guatemala opened its first embassy in Moscow. In July 1998, the first Russian Embassy opened in Guatemala.

Ambassador Nikolayenko said his country has always been famous for its high-tech arms industry. "We could advise [the Army] technically to make it an efficient institution capable of also combating the terrorism that affects many other countries of the whole world," he said. "The experience we had in World War II demonstrated to us the importance of having allies to be able to live in democracy." Nikolayenko said the offer would also include "a total opening of the Russian market for Guatemalan products." Russia has also in recent years provided 15 scholarships a year to its universities for Guatemalans wanting to study there. News reports say an arms deal could be struck in October, when Foreign Minister Jorge Briz visits Moscow to discuss an oil deal.

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