

9-7-2006

Guatemala Replays Wartime Attacks On Indigenous Communities To Appease U.S.

Mike Leffert

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

Recommended Citation

Leffert, Mike. "Guatemala Replays Wartime Attacks On Indigenous Communities To Appease U.S." (2006).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9443>

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.

Guatemala Replays Wartime Attacks On Indigenous Communities To Appease U.S.

by Mike Leffert

Category/Department: Guatemala

Published: 2006-09-07

A timorous Guatemala has once again sacrificed the well-being of its poor indigenous populations to the interests of the US and its penchant for punishing countries that do not toe the mark on issues of drugs and money.

The Guatemalan government announced Aug. 30 the suspension of constitutional rights during a military crackdown on the border with Mexico. The putative reason was poppy plantations. The real reason, say critics, was to suppress populations that have been interfering with the plans of powerful international energy and mining interests to destroy the environment in the search for oil, gold, and other valuable resources.

The populations seem to be locked in a permanent state of outrage while foreign interests decide whether they will be yoked forever to the north's lust for oil and gold, or for drugs. The government's 15-day order suspends, at the very least, citizen's rights to carry firearms, hold meetings without authorization, or have their homes and vehicles safe from arbitrary search and seizure. The government also arrogates to itself the right to carry out its raids and operations under cover of news blackout.

The order warned the media "not to incite rebellion, because on previous occasions radio stations have urged people to resist the destruction of drug crops." Border cities under siege include Ixchuguan, Concepcion Tutuapa, San Miguel Ixtahuacan, Tajumulco, and Tejutla, in the department of San Marcos.

The decree (Decree 1-2006) President Oscar Berger signed is the first step of five available to a government for suspending constitutional rights, or estados de excepcion. It is formally designated an estado de prevencion (state of prevention) and does not require the approval of the legislature. The subsequent steps are the estado de alarma (state of alarm), de calamidad publica (public calamity), the estado de sitio (state of siege), and finally the estado de guerra (state of war).

A few hours after Berger signed the decree, a contingent of 800 police officers, 250 soldiers, and 23 public prosecutors deployed from the San Marcos military base at 3 a.m. in 70 pickup trucks headed for the five towns. At 6 a.m., they began the first break-ins of private homes.

By 11 a.m., this stage of the operation was over. Reports said every vehicle entering or leaving the municipios during the raid was searched and its occupants interrogated. The outcome was two people arrested for drug possession (cocaine and poppy seeds), and two arrested for refusing to give their names to police. The force had helicopters available but did not use them because of adverse

weather conditions. The raids became more fruitful in succeeding days, when personnel fanned out to destroy opium-poppy crops in this environment so well-suited to their cultivation.

These beautiful flowers, which, upon their demise, leave the residue that feeds the insatiable US taste for drugs, have been growing in the area for decades. During the civil war that ended officially at the close of 1996, the crops flourished under the protection of land mines that protected fields from incursion. After the war, international teams of mine-removal experts cleared the explosives, and it was thought then that the poppy fields would be next. But they were not. They continued to flourish for years, leaving to be answered the question, why now?

Performing for the US

John R. Hamilton, recently retired US Foreign Service officer who served as ambassador to Guatemala from 2002 until 2005, offered some explanation in a critique in *The Washington Post* on Sept. 1. In the piece entitled *Scold War Buildup, The Perils of Foreign Policy by Report Card*, Hamilton critiqued the practice of "issuing of public assessments of the performance of other countries, with the threat of economic or political sanctions for those whose performance, in our view, doesn't make the grade. The overuse of these mandated reports makes us seem judgmental, moralistic, and bullying." Hamilton was referring to, among similar practices in other areas, the annual drug-certification exercise.

Prior to these raids, Guatemala was headed for another decertification by the US. The country can little afford the sanctions that follow decertification, last imposed in 2002 (see *NotiCen*, 2003-02-06) in Guatemala on the administration of ex-President Alfonso Portillo (2000-2004), months before Hamilton became ambassador. Last year the Berger government captured a paltry 81 kg of cocaine, a very bad showing for a country that is among the 25 countries with the highest incidence of drug trafficking in the world. The target for 2005 was 900 kg. It would, however, be inopportune for the US to decertify Guatemala at this time.

The superpower has thrown considerable weight behind an effort to get Guatemala elected to a vacancy in the UN Security Council in order to prevent the election of the challenger for the seat, Venezuela (see *NotiCen*, 2006-07-27). Some probability exists, therefore, that even with its dismal record, Guatemala would have gotten a pass. "The decision will respond more to political motives than to statistics. The US will suggest increasing seizures, but it will not decertify," said Manuel Orozco of the Washington-based Inter-American Dialogue. At best, the decertification was a necessary but not sufficient reason to warrant the lengths to which the government has gone to impose so profound a presence in these remote areas after so many years of neglect.

Looking back a week provides additional material for analysis. On Aug. 21, a military force with eight helicopters and two airplanes landed in Ixtahuacan Chiquito, Quiche. Near the Mexican border, the area is home to communities of the former *Comunidades de Poblacion en Resistencia* (CPR), the internally displaced people of the civil war. The army hunted and killed these people relentlessly during the war, and their settlement communities today are among the most sensitive to bellicose visitations that bring back the old terrors. Defense Minister Francisco Bermudez defended the airborne assault, saying its purpose was to find alleged drug trafficker Otto Herrera

and to search for a weapons arsenal left over from the internal conflict. The Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG), then the guerrilla force but now an opposition political party, denied any such weapons stash belonging to them.

On August 22 the Ixcán community issued the following eye-witness account of the assault at Ixtahuacán Chiquito: "Today (Aug, 21), at 11 a.m., seven army helicopters landed in Ixtahuacán Chiquito. Heavily armed soldiers with their faces painted black occupied the football pitch and surrounded the school, preventing school children from leaving the premises. "Soldiers broke into our homes in a violent manner, threatening women and taking our work tools. They then took the tools to an archeological site near our community and supposedly began to dig for weapons. "Until 3 p.m., military airplanes and helicopters flew over the border villages of Fronterizo 10 de Mayo, Los Angeles, and Cuarto Pueblo near the Mexican state of Chiapas.

Terrified women and children fled their homes and sought refuge in the mountains, remembering what they had suffered during the armed conflict. "A similar raid was carried out in Finca Chaila on Aug. 10. Army helicopters arrived in the area and soldiers and other agents who had their faces [covered] ransacked the homes of the finca workers." The attack on Ixtahuacán Chiquito was covered by the media and by several human rights organizations. The Aug. 10 raid on Finca Chaila was ignored in the press. Witnesses said they were beaten and their money was stolen. The community has asked for an investigation.

Communities as obstacles

Other analysts have looked at these actions, extreme for a country still struggling to enter the recovery phase of its recent history, in an effort to answer why now. Congressional Deputy Victor Manuel Sales Ortiz, president of the anti-landmines and peace committee, told the media, "Guatemala has a history of violence against communities that are seen as an obstacle to lucrative hydroelectric or mining projects. In the light of past events, it is important to bear in mind that several major projects have been put forward in Incan and northern Huehuetenango. The Franja Transversal del Norte (FTN), oil extraction, and sugar plantations for the production of ethanol."

The FTN, or Northern Transversal Strip, is a strategic area where a contract for a road from Izabal to Huehuetenango is currently up for bid. This road is the floodgate for international oil and mining contracts that include Britain's Petro Latina Energy in Fray Bartolomé de las Casas and Las Tortugas. The contracts involve the departments of Alta Verapaz and Quiché (Ixcan). Mexico's Petro Energy has interests in Yalpamech, Alta Verapaz. France's Perenco has interests in Rubelsanto, Alta Verapaz, and Chinaja, Peten. Canada's Skye Resources, Jaguar Nickel, and Nichromet have mining interests in Alta Verapaz and Izabal.

The Frente Nacional de Lucha en Defensa de los Servicios Públicos y Recursos Naturales (FNL) issued a statement, saying, "Behind the so-called anti-drug operation is an attempt to intimidate the community that has vehemently opposed the Xalala hydroelectric project as well as mining projects in the municipalities of Ixcán and Cobán, which violate International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169 and which are part of Plan Puebla Panamá (PPP)."

Failed objectives

As intimidation, and as a nod to the US proctors scheduled to give Guatemala its report card on Sept. 15, the raids may have been successful. But operationally, they have by most estimates failed to achieve their objectives. Drug traffickers of any note were few. Plantations destroyed are easily replanted; Mexican investors can freely cross the border to replenish stocks of seeds. Starting from scratch, an abundant harvest takes only 90 days.

The operation was a comedy of errors. It was personally led by director of the Policia Nacional Civil (PNC) Erwin Sperisen and deputy director Javier Figueroa and witnessed by carloads of US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents. At one point, as reported in the press, a cop in full regalia, facemask, sunglasses, rifle with telescopic sites, reported to Figueroa that a suspect, at the point of capture, had escaped. "How," asked Figueroa? "We stopped a motorcycle, but while we were comparing the license data with the list of fugitives, he escaped on his vehicle." "And you didn't chase him?" asked Figueroa. "It's because we don't know where he went," responded the officer. And so it went.

Even to the extent that the operation was successful, the government finds itself in a bind. Apart from having to answer to the international human rights community, there is the matter of reprisals against the agents who will be left behind when the overwhelming force is withdrawn. Angry residents have dealt harshly in the past with police when the odds are in their favor. Campesinos are used to adequate remuneration for their efforts from the Mexican traffickers and are not likely to believe Interior Minister Carlos Vielmann, who said that they would get some kind of help in finding other work. There is no other work.

Elsewhere in the judicial system, the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) has begun to take measures to protect local judges and judicial personnel in the five affected cities. These personnel have told the CSJ they have been warned of reprisals after the armed forces leave. To avoid revenge, the CSJ sent some local judges off for vacation or training and replaced them with judges from far-away localities. Meanwhile, the Comision de Seguridad de Jueces del Organismo Judicial met to consider their options. "We've always said," said president of the organization Napoleon Gutierrez, "that the integrity of the judges must be guaranteed, because the CSJ does not have the means to do it, much less in the interior of the republic."

-- End --