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## Guatemalan Special Forces Veterans Enlist In Iraq, Narco Wars

by Mike Leffert

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Feared as ruthless foes, veterans of Guatemala's Kaibiles elite military force are finding employment as cheap mercenaries in the Iraq war or as better-paid killers in the narco wars raging in Central America and Mexico. Interviewed by the Guatemalan press recently, a former Kaibil recounted how he was recruited, trained, and deployed in Iraq as a contractor for a private US-based security firm. "Jorge" said he and 11 other former Kaibiles underwent extra training at a camp in Honduras before being shipped to Iraq.

"When we were trained in Honduras, we were told that nobody in Iraq is a friend," Jorge said, "and that everyone children, women, and men were enemies, and that in any incident it was necessary to kill." Once in Iraq, Jorge found himself in the company of other Latin Americans from Honduras, El Salvador, Chile, and Argentina.

Kristina Mani, a researcher with Ohio's Oberlin College, has documented the presence of at least 1,000 Peruvian and 700 Salvadoran security personnel in Iraq, as well as Colombians, Guatemalans, Nicaraguans, and Hondurans. "We guarded trucks, embassies, and government functionaries, and we carried out night patrols," Jorge said. The one-time elite soldier said that Latin American military contractors in Iraq earn between US\$2,000 and US\$5,000 monthly far less than the salaries paid to security personnel from the US by firms like Blackwater USA. Nonetheless, Jorge said he was able to save up money and open a small business with his wife when he returned to Guatemala.

Reports of former Guatemalan Kaibiles like Jorge serving as mercenaries in foreign conflicts are stirring renewed concerns in some quarters about veterans of the military force. Founded in 1974, the Kaibiles undergo a grueling and, by many accounts, brutal training at a jungle camp in the northern department of Peten (see NotiCen, 2005-02-17, 2000-03-30).

Human rights organizations and Guatemala's Truth Commission (Comision de Esclarecimiento Historico, CEH) linked the Kaibiles to widespread human rights violations during the civil war that ended in 1996. Kaibiles were implicated in numerous massacres of indigenous Mayan communities.

### *Kaibiles linked to violence in region*

Besides their involvement in Iraq, former and current Kaibiles have been tied to the violence underway between rival drug cartels in Mexico and Central America. In one recent case, for instance, ex-Kaibil Angel Rivas, or Jose Alfredo Romero Salazar, was detained with a group of narco gunmen in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. Carlos Martinez, a former Kaibil officer and 2005 veteran of the UN peacekeeping mission in the Congo, is under investigation by Mexican law-enforcement authorities for his alleged involvement with organized crime.

Reportedly, both the Gulf and Sinaloa drug cartels of Mexico have looked to the Kaibiles as ideal trainers and security men. Los Zetas, the armed enforcers of the Gulf cartel, have run military training camps in the Mexican states of Nuevo Leon, Tamaulipas, and Michoacan where new recruits are given basic and advanced instruction (see SourceMex, 2005-10-19 and 2006-07-26). When combined, the specialized military backgrounds of both the Zetas and the Kaibiles give cartels deadly, professional power.

Some Guatemalans warn that the Kaibiles low pay and lack of employment opportunities after service provide fertile ground for the eventual recruitment of the highly trained soldiers as mercenaries and assassins. The special troops can earn up to 1,800 quetzales monthly (about US \$234) while serving with the state. Drug cartels, on the other hand, reportedly pay at least US\$5,000 for special assignments like escorting and guarding drug shipments. "The army maintains control of [Kaibiles] when they are in active service, but afterward, everyone is a citizen," said Daniel Dominguez, spokesman for the Guatemalan Army. "The Kaibil is attractive for organized crime. It's a shame to lose this human resource, and I believe that the state should offer better options, but we have a limited budget to follow up with this sort of personnel."

Guatemalan Congresswoman Nineth Montenegro, a specialist in military affairs, said the Kaibil issue needs to be revisited. "The state has expelled trained elements because it did not seek a dignified reform to retire the personnel," Montenegro contended. "The officers absorb the main military expenses and leave the troops on the sidelines."

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