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Americas Watch Representative Says Guatemala Asking For Trouble In Requesting U.S. Aid For Police Forces

by Deborah Tyroler

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In a recent article published in the NEW YORK TIMES (03/30/87), Holly J. Burkhalter, Washington representative of Americas Watch, argues that the Guatemalan government's attempts to obtain US aid for upgrading its police forces is both "naive and dangerous." These attempts are particularly unsettling since they correspond to the Reagan administration's longstanding interest in restoring US aid to security forces in Central America and elsewhere. In the FY 1988 budget request, the State Department has called for a virtual repeal of legislation enacted in the 1970s that ended the infamous Office of Public Safety program. The Office was eliminated largely as a result of reports from around the world that US-trained police were engaged in torture, political killings and disappearances. Before the cutoff, some 32,000 Guatemalan police were trained in the United States under the Office at a cost of about \$6 million, the largest number of police trained from Central America. In Burkhalter's words, with US help, the Guatemalan security forces became "a giant computerized death squad. Victims were selected at secret meetings in the National Palace and plainclothes police tortured, executed and abducted political opponents, trade unionists, students, peasant leaders, teachers and lawyers by the thousands. Although no one accuses the government of President Vinicio Cerezo of conspiring to eliminate dissidents or political opponents, human rights abuses by the police and army continue. Independent human rights organizations estimate that in 1986 violent killings averaged 100 per month. Guatemalan newspapers reported that number of corpses displayed the marks of the security forces' modus operandi such as mutilation and torture. President Cerezo does not condone such acts. However, his government has thus far failed to prosecute and punish members of the armed forces and police. Moreover, the weakness of the civilian government is belied by Cerezo's acceptance of the military's blanket amnesty for violations committed in the past. Guatemalan Interior Minister Juan Jose Rodil Peralta has visited Washington recently for meetings with members of Congress. He continues to lobby for US aid in training and equipping the Guatemalan police, arguing that the police are so poorly trained they cannot investigate crimes or produce evidence that holds up in court. The Reagan administration's interest in renewing police aid to Guatemala and other nations is well known and predictable. Past experience has shown that US-aided military, police and intelligence forces have been capable of overpowering Guatemala's fragile civilian structures.

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