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Guatemalan President Vinicio Cerezo's Government & Human Rights: An Account Of Activities, Policy

by Deborah Tyroler

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* Last year, the Guatemalan government created an independent agency empowered to denounce any and all human rights abuses. The agency is known as the Human Rights Attorney office (Procurador de los Derechos Humanos). Several prominent Guatemalans with strong human rights credentials expressed interest in heading the agency. But, the national congress opted for a conservative lawyer, Gonzalo Menendez de la Riva, 83. Menendez's "credentials" for this post are peculiar. For instance, he was a leader in the fight against agrarian reform during the regime of Jacobo Arbenz 35 years ago. (In 1954, Arbenz was overthrown in a coup organized by the CIA, United Fruit and a Guatemalan colonel trained in the US. His "great crime" was an attempt to carry out a land reform to redistribute the country's idle acreage, part of a program to structure the Guatemalan economy along modern capitalist lines. During and after the coup, over 9,000 people were arrested and many tortured. The colonel's government returned over 1.5 million acres to the large landowners, including United Fruit, and 533 labor unions were abolished.) After his appointment by the congress, Menendez opened an office in a residential neighborhood not served by public transportation, and he normally sees visitors by appointment only. He has not sought investigations of past crimes, nor commented on any of several hundred killings that have occurred since he took office. Thus far, his only major public statement has been to denounce an increase in electricity rates as a violation of human rights. * In addition to the agency headed by Menendez, President Vinicio Cerezo's government created a nine-member human rights commission. Late in 1987, at the end of its first year, the commission issued a report indicating that it had made no progress toward determining the whereabouts of missing people or the identities of their abductors. * Regarding the Central American peace plan's provision for amnesty for political prisoners, Defense Minister Gen. Hector Gramajo told the New York Times in an interview: "We didn't pay any attention to that phrase...We took it as something that applied to El Salvador or Nicaragua." * The plan also requires that governments promote "an authentic pluralistic and participatory democratic process" by respecting human rights and promoting social justice. Presidential spokesperson Julio Santos said Guatemala "is committed to complying with each and every part of the accord." Opposition member of congress, Edmond Mulet, disagrees. He told the Times: "Here the view is that the peace plan is something for Nicaragua to comply with. Most politicians in Guatemala have not read the peace plan, don't know what it means and couldn't care less if we comply or not." * In the second week of February, Guatemala's Roman Catholic bishops issued a declaration: "We must recognize that our nation is living through an especially conflictive period in its history, deeply marked by the people's suffering due to economic crisis, criminal and subversive violence, unemployment and the high cost of living. all within the terribly violent context of Central America... "The present moment is also characterized by public confusion and fear of grater evils...There are very clear signs of disillusion, because evils inherited from the past are continuing." * Guatemala's history of human rights abuses provoked an embarrassing diplomatic incident recently. Cerezo designated the former Chief of State, Gen. Oscar Humberto Mejia Victores, to be ambassador to Ecuador, and named Gen. Pablo Nuila Hub as military attache there.

Both have been accused of presiding over brutal counter-insurgency campaigns. After protests in Ecuador, both nominations had to be withdrawn. [Basic data from several sources, including New York Times, 02/17/88; Central America Fact Book by Tom Barry and Deb Preusch (New York: Grove Press, 1986)]

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