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Notes On Guatemalan Situation

by Deborah Tyroler

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In a recent interview with the New York Times, President Vinicio Cerezo said he sensed no immediate threat to his government from the military, but conceded that popular discontent was on the upswing. He did not dismiss the possibility of future attempts to depose him. Cerezo said, "I can't deny that right-wing parties are working to create conditions for a coup. They are trying to persuade army officers to join them. But for now, they are not having any success." Recent economic austerity measures have been met with a wave of strikes and other protests. Such demonstrations of popular discontent would not have been possible under previous military regimes when opposition leaders were systematically killed and disappeared. Nonetheless, violence in Guatemala continues. People are shot in the streets almost every day, and bodies bearing signs of torture are regularly discovered on roadsides. Most observers reportedly do not believe that senior government officials prepare lists of people to be eliminated, a common practice as recently as the early 1980s. A debate continues on who is responsible for the violence under Cerezo. In an interview with the Times, Interior Minister Roberto Valle Valdizon insisted that common criminals were responsible for nearly all assaults on Guatemalans. He said, "There has been a radical change in the origin of violence in Guatemala. I won't say there is no such thing as political violence anymore, because extremist groups still do exist. But the great majority of what we are seeing is the work of the kind of delinquents that are part of every society." Human rights groups and others disagree. Officers linked to urban death squads and military units responsible for massacres of peasants in the past hold posts in the Army, the National Police and the Treasury Police. In the countryside, military officers continue to pressure peasants to participate in "civilian patrols" officially aimed at controlling the guerrillas. Estimates on the number of Guatemalan guerrillas average about 1,000. The current Constitution states that civilian patrols are strictly voluntary. Edgar Heinemann, head of the country's major business coalition, says that Guatemalans brought \$250 million back into the country in the first six months of 1987. The process, according to Heinemann, has been reversed: in the first half of 1988, no new money was repatriated and about \$40 million was sent to foreign accounts. He told the Times: "People aren't worried that there is going to be some disaster tomorrow, but there is fear about what may lie further ahead." (Basic data from New York Times, 09/04/88)

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