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Guatemala: Description Of Selected Popular Movement Organizations

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+ University Student Association, University of San Carlos, Guatemala City (Asociacion de Estudiantes Universitarios-AEU). The AEU has joined the Labor and Popular Action Unity coalition (UASP), marched with the labor federation UNSITRAGUA, protested price hikes for electricity and basic foodstuffs, and supported the Central America peace plan. Fierce government repression virtually halted student organizing in 1984 and 1985. During a four-month period in 1984, 19 students, faculty and staff at the USAC were "disappeared." Another seven students were abducted in the course of only one week in May 1984. In September 1985, the Army invaded the main campus in Guatemala City, causing extensive damage. The AEU's student union building was wrecked and all its archives stolen or burned. At present, the AEU has a 16-member executive committee and "working commissions" in the areas of culture and sports, university affairs, national and popular affairs, information and international affairs. Its organizing takes place in the face of selective and sophisticated repression. Student groups are infiltrated, phones are tapped and all mail arrives opened. In the past year, the most violent repression has occurred on campuses outside Guatemala City. For example, two agronomy students in Quetzaltenango were kidnapped and killed in October 1987. The AEU is currently seeking funds for three projects: a university-based, student-run radio station; health clinics to provide free out-patient care and minor surgery to poor Guatemalans, and a campus-based xerox center for low-income students. + Campesino Unity Committee (Comite de Unidad Campesina-CUC). One of the only groups to organize effectively among both indigenous and ladino populations, the CUC was forced underground by severe repression in 1980, two years after the organization was established. Clandestine work continued over the next eight years despite continued repression. The CUC resurfaced in 1988, and participated openly in the May Day demonstration in Guatemala City under a banner proclaiming, "We want land, we want peace." CUC currently organizes secretly in the countryside, in model villages, among the displaced, and with among the "population in resistance," a group of between 7,000 and 10,000 mostly Indian noncombatants who live in the mountains and jungles of Quiche and Huehuetenango departments. Having fled army repression in 1981 and 1982, they refuse to seek exile in Mexico or leave the mountains and reside in the army's strategic hamlets. The CUC's 10th anniversary statement (April 1988) identifies its major concerns: Guatemala's extremely unequal land tenure structure; military control and abuses in the countryside; low wages paid to plantation workers; and, the exploitation, discrimination and mistreatment of indigenous people. + Center for Investigation, Study and Promotion of Human Rights (Centro de Investigacion, Estudio y Promocion de Derechos Humanos-CIEPRODH). Formed in October 1987, and headquartered in Guatemala City, CIEPRODH receives information from a network of 75 volunteers in eight departments. Based on these reports and newspaper, radio and TV accounts, the Center compiles statistics on killings, disappearances, attacks and threats. CIEPRODH also conducts research on refugees and the effects of low-intensity warfare. As of early December 1988, CIEPRODH had sponsored over 50 human rights conferences and seminars for unions, students and peasants. The Center also organized two national forums and a five-day international conference in summer 1988 with participants from 19

countries and 53 human rights organizations. The Center's work is conducted openly; conferences are advertised in the print media and the group's research (some of which has been published in two quarterly reports) has been noted in the Guatemalan media. In addition to research and documentation, CIEPRODH is providing medical care in Quiche department, and contemplates setting up a project to benefit widows and orphans, most likely a weaving cooperative. The group's founder, Guatemalan lawyer Factor Mendez, returned to the country in 1987, after seven years in exile. Having established a track record of reliable research, the group is now seeking international visibility. + Runejel Jaunam group (CERJ). The CERJ is a rural, mostly indigenous group based in southern Quiche department. CERJ openly protests abuses by the civil defense patrols. "Runejel jaunam" is Quiche for "todos iguales," meaning "we're all equal" or "we're all the same." Founded on July 31, 1988, the group's first action was an Aug. 17 march in Guatemala City culminating in a presentation to the national congress's Human Rights Commission of a petition denouncing civil patrol abuses. The petition stated that boys in the highlands are forced to participate in patrols; that people failing to participate are threatened with death and accused of being communists or subversives, and are told that "they and their families will be disappeared if they do not return to the patrols "to give patriotic services." The petition also mentions constant military surveillance of persons who are not engaged in patrols, and arbitrary punishment by patrol commanders. CERJ director Amilcar Mendez Urizar, a former school teacher, has received telephone and written death threats. One of the latter was signed by the Secret Anti-Communist Army, a death squad. He has also been threatened by the local military commissioners for the town of San Andres Sajcabaja after attempting to organize a meeting. CERJ members have been disappeared and murdered. + Mutual Support Group (Grupo de Amparo Mutuo-GAM). Formed in mid-1984, GAM is Guatemala's most visible functioning human rights group. Its members are relatives mainly women of persons who were disappeared. For over four years, GAM has been petitioning the government and has organized public demonstrations calling for the return of the disappeared. Recently, GAM has expanded its work to help campesinos in the countryside disclose the sites of clandestine cemeteries. Two such sites were publicly exhumed in June 1988 after the GAM publicized their locations, and the bodies of seven people were identified. Despite the murders of two GAM leaders in 1985, and continuing death threats and other forms of pressure, the GAM continues to confront the government and the army. The organization calls for investigations into 40,000 disappearances and prosecution of responsible parties. + National Coordinating Group of Guatemalan Widows (Coordinadora Nacional de Viudas de Guatemala-CONAVIGU). This national group was founded on Sept. 12, 1988. In an ad published in the Guatemalan press, CONAVIGU identifies its members as women who have been left widowed due to their husbands being kidnapped, disappeared, murdered or massacred; and women whose husbands died result of disease. They note, "Many [of our husbands] became ill when they went to work on the coffee, cotton and sugar plantations, just to earn a few cents. The wage they received wasn't even enough to cure them, let alone build up their strength with good nutrition." CONAVIGUA's demands include providing necessary food, medicine, housing and clothing for the dead spouses' families and children; government provision of education; fighting the "abuse, rape and exploitation which we suffer at the hands of soldiers, civil patrol leaders, military commissioners and other opportunists..."; helping Guatemalan women, especially rural Indian women, "become conscious and active in the struggle for the well-being of the community" and the country; fighting for human rights, including investigation and punishment of those responsible for human rights violations; and, reducing the high cost of living. CONAVIGUA has requested membership in the UASP. + Grupo Monsenor Romero. This group is comprised of a small community of Christian brothers who live, work and organize in a Guatemala City slum.

Inspired by GAM, members work with grass-roots organizations to build unity, and to construct with them "a new society in which justice and peace can reign." The group takes its theological bearings from the Catholic Church's preferential option for the poor and from the "prophetic words and martyr's testimony" of Monsenor Oscar Romero, the Salvadoran archbishop who became a spokesperson for his country's poor and opposed the Salvadoran army's war against its own people. + Labor federation UNSITRAGUA. UNSITRAGUA unites many progressive independent private sector unions, including Coca Cola workers, 30 other industrial unions and two banana workers' unions. Several textile sector unions are members, including the Lunafil threadmakers' union. Lunafil union members recently concluded a 13-month, non-violent occupation of the company's factory in the face of harassment from owners and violence at the hands of the National Police. UNSITRAGUA's support was critical in building international awareness of and solidarity with the Lunafil strike. UNSITRAGUA also plays a very important role directing the work of the UASP coalition. + Union and Popular Action Unity (Unidad y Accion Sindical y Popular-UASP). Originally an effort to form a coalition of labor federations based on a single program, UASP has joined independent unions, union federations, the CUC, and university students. The UASP grew out of a drive to block government price increases for electricity. GAM, although not a member, participates in UASP mobilizations. The UASP has worked to block government price hikes for electricity and basic foodstuffs; denounce human rights violations; and actively supports dialogue as the means to end the counterinsurgency war. In March 1988, the UASP was able to compel the government to negotiate on some of the above demands. Since then, however, the government has failed to fulfill its pledges. + National Electricity Workers Union (Sindicato de Trabajadores del Instituto Nacional de Electricidad-STINDE). STINDE, Guatemala's largest public sector union, represents workers who construct and maintain hydroelectric plants, power lines and other electrical infrastructure. This union is a powerful one, given the strategic nature of its work, and the fact that it has workers located throughout the country. (Unions in Guatemala are organized by workplace, not by industry. Thus, a union is national only when its employer company has offices or plants nationwide.) STINDE has been a leading force in uniting and establishing a progressive agenda for the Guatemalan trade union movement. Alongwith UNSITRAGUA, the STINDE centers the work of the UASP coalition. In 1988, when unions and other groups encouraged their constituencies not to pay electricity bills under the new higher rates, STINDE members volunteered to refuse cutting off power to those who refused to pay. STINDE also carries out social programs of its own that reach beyond narrowly defined labor issues. It has conducted a successful literacy campaign for its members, their families and anyone else living in the neighborhood where classes are held given. The union is also researching the health needs of members' communities. [Basic data from 12/01/88 report by Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA), Washington DC]

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