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Guatemala: Summary Of Human Rights Situation, Part 1

by Deborah Tyroler

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Human rights groups estimate that during the 16 years of military rule preceding Vinicio Cerezo's inauguration in January 1986, 100,000 people were murdered and 40,000 disappeared. Census data collected by the Guatemalan Supreme Court Juvenile Division in 1985 revealed that between 150,000 and 200,000 orphans resided in the country's highlands. Based on the census data, the Division concluded that 45,000 to 60,000 Indian parents were killed between 1978 and 1985. In the 1978-85 period, 440 villages ceased to exist, and 100,000 Indians fled to Mexico. According to the Guatemalan Bishops Conference, half a million Indian families relocated within Guatemala. Of this number, 70,000 were forcibly relocated by the Army to "model villages." Since then, the Army has forced 600,000 young men into uncompensated service in militias to inform on their own communities and provide labor for military projects. Military control in rural Guatemala continues to the present. The installation of a civilian president in 1986 offered hope that the widespread and systematic terror of the previous 16 years was finally at an end. The frequency of human rights abuses declined somewhat in 1986 and 1987 compared to the previous five years. 1988 was the worst year since Cerezo took power. Most of the organizations monitoring human rights in Guatemala say politically-motivated assassinations began to increase immediately after the May 11 coup attempt. The army high command quickly suppressed the uprising, but in return, Cerezo was forced to give the military a free hand in security policies. The president also had to agree, among other things, to terminate talks with the guerrillas, increase the armed forces budget, and give the military active command of the National Police and the Treasury Police. Government critics trace the roots of the renewed violence to an amnesty proclaimed by outgoing president Brig. Gen. Oscar Mejia Victores, four days before Cerezo's inauguration. The decree in effect prevented prosecution of military men for human rights abuses committed in the 1982-86 period. Rights observers have criticized Cerezo for refusing to work for the repeal of the amnesty, which they say permitted death squads to survive underground. Some political observers argue that the president would certainly have been overthrown by the military if he had supported a repeal of the amnesty. Highlights of human rights reports released in 1988 are summarized below. * On Feb. 29, 1988, the UN Human Rights Commission passed a resolution stating that Guatemala had made some progress toward guaranteeing human rights, and called on the government to establish mechanisms to prevent violations. The UN Working Group on Forced or Involuntary Disappearances listed positive steps, but emphasized that the number of disappearances remained high, and that a climate of fear throughout the country prevailed two years after the civilian regime was installed. * On March 10 the National Police arrested six agents of the Treasury Police driving a white van linked to death squad activity in the capital, including the kidnapping and murder of Ana Elizabeth Paniagua and Jose Alberto Grijalva. The capture of the "death van" and arrest of the Treasury Police agents was followed by an unsuccessful rescue attempt at the police barracks by 100 other Treasury Police officers, the firing of the director of the Treasury Police by President Cerezo, and a continuing investigation. The Mutual Support Group (GAM) charged on March 16 that the capture of the "death van" was intended only to make the police look good so as to justify foreign aid. GAM spokespersons pointed out that death threats had forced into exile both the family of Paniagua and a student representative to the Labor and Popular Action Unity (UASP) coalition. * In a report

presented in April to the tenth assembly of the Costa Rica-based Central American Human Rights Commission (CODEHUCA), the Guatemalan Human Rights Commission (Mexico City) cited 455 extrajudicial executions and 121 disappearances in 1986; 427 killings and 112 disappearances in 1987; and 98 killings and 32 disappearances during the first three months of 1988. The Guatemala City-based Center for the Investigation, Study and Promotion of Human Rights (CIEPRODH) counted 196 assassinations, 35 disappearances and 13 abductions during the first three months of 1988. In most cases, said the Center, those responsible were "unknown assailants who act with total impunity." The highest rates of violence occurred in Guatemala City, Jutiapa, and San Marcos: of 334 cases of violence reported, 59% were assassinations and 22% were victims of torture. * According to Guatemalan press monitors, while the incidence of political violence in early 1988 was lower than in late 1987, the number of politically-motivated disappearances and killings rose sharply again in May. In a June issue, Central America Report (CAR) stated that following a four-month decline, political violence rose dramatically in May. The Report indicated that the new wave of violence was linked to the resurgence of the ESA (Secret Anti-Communist Army) and Mano Blanca (White Hand) death squads. Cases of political violence declined by a third, from 409 in August-December 1987 to 267 in January-May 1988, said CAR, but "the patterns of violence remain the same [under civilian administration...]." CAR emphasized that the total number of violent incidents in May was four times greater than in April. * Local press accounts indicated that the number of human rights abuses in June surpassed the total recorded for the first five months of the year. The upsurge in violence apparently continued in subsequent months. * In a report released in October titled "Campana internacional contra el incremento de la represion," the Mexico City-based Guatemalan Human Rights Commission (CDHG) stated that political violence had increased since the attempted coup in May, and especially during August through early October. Victims of the new wave of violence were urban workers, labor union leaders, peasants, members of indigenous communities, members of women's groups, widows, clergypersons, university and secondary students, and members of political parties. CDHG reported bombings of indigenous communities in San Marcos, Chimaltenango and Solola departments. In the same areas, the army forced residents to participate in civil patrols, and expanded the number of regular military. The report enumerated cases of mass grave exhumation, disappearance, extrajudicial arrest, torture, murder, and abduction in the departments of El Peten, El Quiche, San Marcos, Suchitepequez, Solola, Chimaltenango, Escuintla, Santa Rosa, Chiquimula and Guatemala. (cont.)

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