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Guatemala: Notes On Press Freedom

by Deborah Tyroler

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Prior to President Vinicio Cerezo's inauguration in January 1986, Guatemala had the second highest incidence (after Argentina) of violent repression against journalists in the Western hemisphere. Over five dozen print, radio and TV reporters were disappeared or killed since the mid-1970s. From early 1986 to May 1988, direct attacks against journalists were comparatively rare, but were not unknown. For instance, on May 5, 1987, 45-year-old journalist Ricardo Quintanilla was murdered in Guatemala City. After Cerezo was installed, the Guatemalan media continued to practice strict self-censorship or to participate in the "fafa" (bribe system). Many newspaper or broadcast outlet owners use the media as a means of influencing the political process, or to secure high-level government posts. [The country's two major dailies, Prensa Libre and El Grafico (each with daily editions of about 60,000), are largely comprised of ads. El Grafico often prints only seven pages of national news in an average 80-page edition. Jorge Carpio, principal stockholder and general director of El Grafico, organized a rightwing party called "Del Centro Nacional." This party's presidential candidate took second place in the 1985 presidential elections. Three other dailies are described as pertaining to the "mainstream press": La Nacion, El Diario de Centroamerica, and La Hora. Editors of La Nacion have often been directly involved in national politics, i.e., supporting one or the other rightwing party, one or the other general. El Diario, the government's official newspaper, publishes limited editions and contains the text of legislative and executive branch decrees, bills, authorizations, etc. La Hora (daily editions of about 5,000) is owned by a family of journalists, most of whom have secured government positions via strategic use of their professional skills.] Following the May 11 coup attempt, rightwing sectors and government officials underscored their desire to eliminate what they perceived as communist penetration by striking out against certain journalists. Before dawn on May 18, the office and home of Tass correspondent Alex Trouchine were firebombed, causing heavy damage to his home and destroying his car. Trouchine said that on May 9 he received a letter (dated April 14) signed by the Mano Blanca death squad. The letter, he said, contained death threats and criticized the Cerezo administration for allowing a Soviet correspondent to reside in Guatemala. Manuel Guerrero, the correspondent for the Cuban news agency, Prensa Latina, received similar death threats. Trouchine and Guerrero left the country one week after the firebombing. On June 10, the offices of La Epoca a weekly Guatemalan newspaper that had published only 16 times since its inception on Feb. 26 were firebombed before dawn, allegedly by G-2 security forces under orders from a high-ranking G-2 official. The bombing of La Epoca, located three blocks from National Police headquarters and seven from the National Palace, was witnessed by two night watchmen. One of the watchmen was briefly abducted, and the other was drugged for a short time. According to one of watchmen, seven men "in short hair and military boots just like the Army's" broke into the newspaper offices. During a June 14 press conference at the Guatemalan Journalists Association office, La Epoca director Byron Barrera Ortiz announced that the newspaper would be closed, declaring that it marked "the end of freedom of the press in Guatemala." Barrera left the country on the following day. La Epoca writer Julio Godoy was briefly abducted, then released on May 28. A third staff writer, Carlos Rafael Soto, was denounced as a communist by coup co-conspirator Col. Diaz-Lopez. Soto had traveled to Cuba for two eye operations earlier in the year, once while he still served as public relations director for

the National Police. The bombing of La Epoca signaled not only the end of an independent media voice in Guatemala, but also served as a warning that future press independence would not be tolerated. Although the Cerezo government officially condemned the bombing of La Epoca's offices, it has repeatedly attempted to thwart efforts at objective reporting by independent journalists. [For instance, presidential press secretary Claudia Arenas requested that the Inter-Press Service (IPS) fire its correspondent, Julio Godoy, since his reporting was "one-sided and liberal." IPS did not respond. In 1987, in a front-page story the New York Times described Godoy as one of Guatemala's foremost young intellectuals.] Two days after the La Epoca bombing, local journalists attending a congressional seminar in Panajachel received written death threats which were slipped under their hotel room doors. While the messages did not mention names, they contained death threats against all journalists who had recently returned from exile to Guatemala, warning that if they did not resume their lives in exile, they would be killed. [Sources: Back issues of Central America Update; and selected reports by the Centro Exterior de Reportes Informativos sobre Guatemala (CERIGUA), Apartado Postal 74206, C.P. 09080, Delegacion Iztapalapa, Mexico, DF.]

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