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Category/Department: General

Published: Friday, April 28, 1989

The Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) has declared war on plantation owners in the agro-export zones of the country after their rejection of farm laborers' demands for a minimum wage hike and improved working conditions. Since late January, when 50,000 cane cutters and field hands went on strike and occupied dozens of large fincas and sugar refineries, the rightist plantation owners have refused to negotiate in good faith. The landowners, with the cooperation of the government, have instead unleashed a wave of violent repression and intimidation directed against members and leaders of the main campesino organization, the Campesino Unity Committee (CUC). Thousands of agricultural workers have been fired and threatened for participating in the strike, the already militarized region has been kept under tight surveillance, and over two dozen campesinos have been assassinated or kidnapped. In retaliation, URNG guerrillas have launched a counter-attack. Since late January, when thousands of heavily armed government security forces were sent into the agro-export regions to break the strike, the URNG has burned fields, destroyed farm machinery, ambushed military convoys, and occupied approximately 25 large fincas and villages in Suchitepequez, Escuintla, Chimaltenango, and San Marcos departments. This guerrilla offensive has inflicted significant casualties on the army, caused widespread material damage, and delivered a powerful political-psychological message to plantation owners and resistance-minded farmworkers. According to Radio Voz Popular, the URNG's clandestine station, insurgents are targeting fincas which are serving as operational bases for the Guatemalan army as well as those whose owners continue to abuse and exploit their workers. According to rightwing Guatemalan Chamber of Commerce (CACIF), the guerrilla sabotage and attacks have provoked a generalized crisis and a sense of frustration among the finca owners, leading to "insecurity, labor conflict, and disinvestment" in the affected areas. The armed forces high command, evidently embarrassed by their inability to handle the crisis, have tried to downplay the URNG counter-offensive. Minister of Defense Hector Gramajo Morales, in an April 1 press conference, claimed that only an insignificant number of "isolated terrorist bands" continued to operate in four departments of the country. This statement flies in the face of recent reports by news organizations Cerigua and Enfoprensa, as well as reports in the national press. According to such reports, in the first three months of the year, the Guatemalan military suffered 438 casualties. In a typical URNG action carried out at 6 p.m. on March 20 near the town of Santa Lucia Cotzumalguapa, 100 well-trained guerrillas, including both men and women, stormed the administrative offices of the Finca Palmira and seized money and weapons from the plantation guards. The insurgents then brought together the finca's 500 workers for a mass meeting. After burning a bus owned by the finca owner, the guerrillas spoke to the assembled crowd about wages, working conditions, land reform, and recent developments in Guatemala's 28-year-old civil war. As usual, by the time military units arrived on the scene, the guerrillas had disappeared. They struck again several days later in the same vicinity. The day before the raid on Finca Palmira, 850 agricultural workers attended a demonstration and rally in the central park of Santa Lucia Cotzumalguapa. At the rally, student and trade union leaders from Guatemala's aboveground popular front, the UASP, called rally for a doubling of the campesinos' minimum wage
to 10 quetzals a day (US$3.50); an improvement in the slave-like working conditions on the fincas; and a halt to the murders and kidnappings which have reached alarming proportions throughout the country (averaging between 100 to 200 per month). Within seven days of the rally, the URNG occupied three large fincas all within a 10-mile radius of Santa Lucia Cotzumalguapa. Meanwhile, guerrilla columns have been attacking army units and installations in El Quiche, Huehuetenango, Alta Verapaz, Peten, and Solala departments. Since January, insurgent activity has taken place in nine of Guatemala's 22 departments. Over 3 million Guatemalans reside in the nine departments. In late January, guerrillas in Guatemala City announced the formation of a new group, Comando Urbano Revolucionario, and warned right-wing death squads and military officials that the guerrilla war will soon reappear in the country's cities. In related developments, the Guatemala City news organization Inforpress Centroamericana, announced March 30 that the Guatemalan army was forcing large numbers of indigenous civil patrol units to participate for the first time in a large military offensive underway in the Ixcan area of northern El Quiche, a stronghold of the URNG's Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP). This operation follows recent mass protests by indigenous groups opposed to participating in the civil patrols based in El Quiche, Solala, and Chimaltenango departments. The CERJ (Ethnic Communities Council) and other grass roots Indian organizations have been calling for the abolition of these highly unpopular paramilitary units, whose ranks include almost one million members of indigenous communities located in Guatemala's highlands. The UASP and human rights groups have also called for the abolition of the civil patrols, which the army high command and President Vinicio Cerezo claim are "voluntary." * Jon Reed, educator and free-lance journalist, is based in Mexico and Central America.

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