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Attempted Coup In Guatemala: Account Of Developments

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May 9: AP reported that at about 6:30 a.m. troops and soldiers surrounded the home of Defense Minister Hector Gramajo. Military planes and helicopters flew overhead and tanks were parked strategically nearby. Rebel troops, said AP, marched beside tanks outside the minister's residence. Many of the rebels wore blue kerchiefs. Radio and television stations interrupted their normal broadcasts to play military marches. By 8:30 a.m., most of the troops had returned to their barracks and the aircraft returned to bases. Carlos Anleu, a presidential palace spokesperson told AP in a telephone interview, "Everything is under control." He said the coup attempt was staged by a tactical unit of the air force based in southern Guatemala City. Anleu added that "reserve officers" who participated in the incident had been arrested. The coup, said AP, apparently was crushed by soldiers loyal to the government who entered the city earlier in tanks and helicopters. AFP reported that unidentified unofficial sources said the uprising began in the Air Force Tactical Detachment at midnight, but failed because rebels were not able to organize support from other garrisons. By dawn, rebel soldiers had positioned a tank in front of the entrance to the Honor Guard's barracks, located only two blocks from Gramajo's residence in southern Guatemala City. Later Air Force helicopters began to overfly the capital. Meanwhile, loyal troops in tanks and armored cars took up strategic positions around the city and occupied the National Police headquarters. The same sources said Air Force helicopters had flown over the capital to pressure for their demands that Defense Minister Gramajo and Interior Minister Roberto Valle Valdizan resign. AFP was told that leaders of the rebellion included retired soldiers, a wealthy businessperson and a cattle rancher. Unidentified witnesses told AFP the rebel officers dressed in civilian clothing and identified themselves by carrying blue kerchiefs. Loyalist troops continued to occupy the National Police headquarters throughout the day. A presidential communiqué released in late morning and broadcast by Notimex said that a group of retired officers and civilians had provoked a "breach of discipline" at the Air Force tactical detachment. By mid-morning, said Notimex, the presidential palace, Gramajo's residence, National Police headquarters and the Guatemalan Communications Institute (GUATEL) were under guard by heavily-armed troops. According to the Mexican government news service, military commandos occupied the state-run radio complex at 5 a.m. A few hours after the attempted coup at a news conference, Gramajo said rebel air force troops supported by two helicopter gunships and an A-37 warplane blocked two major highways on the south and northeast edges of the capital. Gramajo said rebel troops also tried to march on his home. He stated that the rebels were turned back when they encountered a superior force of loyalist troops. Gramajo said loyalist troops, tanks and artillery took up defensive positions at strategic sites after the plot was discovered at about 5 a.m. Loyalists surrounded the presidential palace, government communications company, National Police headquarters, national broadcasting facilities, and the minister's home. According to the minister, loyalist not rebel troops identified themselves by wearing blue kerchiefs. Most of them returned to barracks by 8:30 a.m. after the rebel aircraft returned to base. At the same news conference, President Vinicio Cerezo said the rebellion was crushed without a shot being fired. Both Cerezo and minister Gramajo said the attempt was led by the air force tactical unit based at the international airport south of the capital. The uprising, they said, was led by at least 10 current, retired or cashiered military officers, including several who participated in the May
11, 1988, coup attempt. Cerezo and Gramajo said all but two high-ranking officers involved in Tuesday's plot had been arrested. The two apparently escaped in a plane. The president stated that no civilians, nor any political party, were involved. Cerezo said rebels tried to occupy radio and TV to broadcast a communique. He claimed the uprising was "entirely a military affair" that still was under investigation. "The situation is totally under control in the government and military of Guatemala," he said. [Cerezo, who took office in January 1986, has been targeted by rightists with a barrage of criticism due to certain economic policies, particularly tax reform, and earlier attempts to open talks with the guerrilla coalition, the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG). On April 16, Cerezo blamed rightist paramilitary groups for a resurgence of political violence, and said they threatened the nation's democracy. In a nationally televised speech, he said, "Democracy is being put in danger by the recklessness of some groups and people who constantly violate the law." The president said rightwing groups were responsible for the death of Irma Esquivel de Lara, 37, a criminal court judge who was gunned down on a street in Guatemala City last week. At the time he said, "There exist some groups traditionally of the extreme right that aren't happy with democracy. They don't like it that we are satisfied with a democratic government." On May 4, Navy Capt. Romeo Guevara Reyes was removed from his position as National Police chief by Interior Minister Roberto Valle Valdizan. Three days previously, spokesperson for the National Police, Carlos Chen, was fired. Chen had publicly accused the Interior Ministry of ordering him to keep information from the media. On May 2, Air Force commander-in-chief Gen. Eduardo Wholers, was retired. Gen. Humberto Angeles Juarez was named as his replacement. Wholers' retirement reportedly was a result of testimony by two officers arrested for stealing helicopter and aircraft parts from the Air Force. Defense Minister Gramajo told reporters May 2 that he had no comment on replacing Interior Minister Valle Valdizan with Gen. Manuel Antonio Callejas, currently armed forces chief of staff. The Interior Minister has come under attack in the local media due to a recent increase in common crime, and particularly since the uprising at the Pavon prison farm in March.] May 10: Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari telephoned Cerezo and expressed his solidarity with government efforts to maintain peace and democracy. A spokesperson for the Honduran presidency said his government condemned the coup attempt. Central American nations, said the spokesperson, are committed to democracy. The governments of Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and Venezuela called on the Organization of American States to express its support for Cerezo's government, and requested that the OAS prepare a report on the coup attempt. During a speech before 15,000 demonstrators assembled outside the Presidential Palace, Cerezo asserted that "unity in all things" was necessary to strengthen democracy in Guatemala. Without unity, he said, Guatemala will renew its experience with bloodshed and chaos. Next, Cerezo said popular organizations and political parties have the right to criticize and point out errors committed by the government "because liberty and democracy" exist in Guatemala. The National Union of the Center (UCN), the nation's second-largest political party, condemned "all violent attempts to interrupt the legitimate political process and against the constitutional order." The UCN also blamed the government for its inability to "control acts of violence, crime, and corruption," among other undesirable activities. (Basic data from several reports by AP, AFP, Notimex, DPA, 05/09/89; Notimex, 05/04/89; Xinhua, Notimex, 05/10/89)