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Guatemalan President: Public Employees On Strike Wish To Destroy Democracy & Rule Of Law

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On July 19, in a message broadcast on radio and television, President Vinicio Cerezo said that some 60,000 public sector employees currently on strike were causing an enormous loss to "democracy." Supporters of the strike, he added, "wish to destroy the rule of law." About 40,000 of the strikers are public elementary and secondary school teachers. As of July 19, the teachers had been on strike for a month and a half. In the first half of the month, strikers have staged demonstrations on a daily basis in downtown Guatemala City. On July 18, 30 strikers commenced a hunger strike. According to Cerezo, the strike is no longer an action of the labor movement because it is financed by the extreme right, and certain radical leftist groups have encouraged strikers to participate in violence. Examples of violence mentioned by the president were a recent attempt to burn the main door to the congressional building, and the army's deactivation of a bomb in the downtown area on July 19. Cerezo said the strikers "are creating conditions for radical groups to take advantage of the teachers' movement." The government has steadfastly refused to consider the teachers' demand for a pay hike, arguing that it would be inflationary. Next, Cerezo said that beginning next week the government will contract new teachers to reopen schools, and attempt to settle strikes in other public agencies. As of late June, striking teachers were asking for a raise of 200 quetzals per month, but said they would be flexible if the government was prepared to act in good faith in negotiations. Spokesperson Jose Leiva pointed out that the government increased the salaries of army officers by 205 quetzals per month. Consequently, he said, the president's statements regarding inflation are apparently applicable only to selected categories of workers. Cerezo insisted negotiations would begin only after termination of the strike. (Basic data from Notimex, 07/19/89; El Grafico, 06/24/89)

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