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Guatemala: Catholic Church Leads In Formation Of Anti-terrorism Front

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On Sept. 20, Guatemala City's Catholic Archbishop Prospero Penados announced the formation of a church-led anti-terrorism front, which includes labor unions and small business organizations. The front was created in response to an escalation in political violence; in the past two weeks alone, death squads committed at least 30 murders. According to government statistics, in the first half of 1989, more than 1,500 Guatemalans were murdered, about 2,500 were victims of assault, and 800 abducted. Human rights organizations and victims' relatives claim paramilitary groups linked to the security forces are responsible for much of the violence. On Sept. 18, President Vinicio Cerezo acknowledged that the security forces are involved in the violence. He said "extremists" had infiltrated some police and military units. Within the past two months, police have recorded more than 40 bomb attacks, abductions of some 20 student leaders, and the murders of dozens of people. The AFP reported that most of the homicide victims were student movement leaders. Next, there have been reports of an upsurge in death threats against labor leaders, journalists, and Guatemalans recently returned from refugee camps in Mexico. In the early 1980s, over 40,000 Indians fled their homes to Mexico to escape unprecedented bloodshed and literal genocide practiced by military governments against indigenous communities. The Guatemalan Human Rights Commission and several other Central American and Mexican student, humanitarian, and labor organizations have publicly excoriated Cerezo for failing to act against the death squads. (Basic data from AFP, 09/21/89)

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