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Guatemala: Americas Watch Report

by Deborah Tyroler

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In "Messengers of Death: Human Rights in Guatemala," a 118-page report released March 7, Americas Watch charges the Guatemalan security forces with responsibility for a sharp increase in human rights abuses, particularly political killings, disappearances, and torture. The civilian government of President Vinicio Cerezo, now in its fifth and last year, clearly does not direct the repression, Americas Watch concludes, but has failed to investigate or prosecute members of the military who have committed abuses. Instead, the government has approached human rights as a public relations problem. The Cerezo government has hired three lobbyists in Washington to convince US congresspersons it is deserving of increasing amounts of foreign aid. In Guatemala City, the government has erected a labyrinth of commissions which, although theoretically designed to investigate abuses, has actually served to deflect attention from military responsibility. Meanwhile, the government has presided over a vicious attempt to silence the voices of independent human rights monitors. During the period covered by this report, November 1988-March 1990, five human rights activists have been abducted and disappeared, and one killed under circumstances suggesting official involvement. The report said Americas Watch could not determine the number of abuse victims since the army would not allow local human rights groups to operate freely and collect data. Americas Watch welcomes the US government's greater willingness to publicly condemn violent abuses by the Guatemalan security forces, as it did in the State Department's Country Reports for Human Rights Practices for 1989, released last month. Americas Watch faults the Bush administration for sending mixed signals on human rights by its growing cooperation with the Guatemalan military throughout 1989. Noting that Section 502B of the US Foreign Assistance Act prohibits the provision of military aid to countries whose governments engage in a consistent pattern of gross human rights violations, Americas Watch calls for an end to such aid. Some of the abuses noted in the report are summarized below: * A significant increase in extrajudicial executions, disappearances, and kidnappings. Among those targeted are students, teachers, human rights monitors, trade unionists, political leaders, and members of peasant organizations. Since August 1989, 14 members of the University of San Carlos community in Guatemala City have been abducted. Six were later found dead and three were released. The rest remain disappeared. * The use of torture by government forces appears to be pervasive and often deadly, judging from the condition of corpses found discarded throughout the country and the testimony of a few individuals who have survived. Among the victims in 1989 were a US nun and a Mormon elder. * A rash of grenade and bomb attacks began in Guatemala City in July 1989, terrorizing, among others, human rights and humanitarian groups. The government has blamed extreme rightist elements for the attacks, but has failed to prosecute responsible parties. * Human rights monitors, trade unionists, journalists, members of the church, and others deemed subversive by the military have been subjected to death threats and harassment. Many political killings were preceded by such threats. * Despite a constitutional provision forbidding forced participation in civil patrols, threats and coercion against civilians who do not wish to patrol continue. The Americas Watch report notes two "bright spots": * The Guatemalan Congress has appointed a new Human Rights Attorney, Ramiro de Leon Carpio, who has vowed to energetically investigate political killings and disappearances, an area his predecessor failed to address adequately. De Leon has

also begun a new investigation into the still unsolved massacre of 22 civilians near the village of El Aguacate in November 1988. * In January 1990, the Catholic Archdiocese of Guatemala City opened a human rights office called the "Miraculous Virgin" Social Service Office of the Archbishopric of Guatemala (Oficina de Servicio Social "Virgen Milagrosa" del Arzobispado de Guatemala or OSSAG). The office will offer courses on human rights, assist victims of human rights abuses, and report violations to domestic and international entities. Americas Watch calls on the Guatemalan authorities to offer the office complete cooperation and effective guarantees so that the staff can carry out its work without hindrance. [Americas Watch monitors and promotes human rights in Latin America and the Caribbean. The report was written by Anne Manuel, Research Director of Americas Watch, based on investigations conducted in Guatemala by several members of the Americas Watch staff, board, and consultants throughout the period under study. Americas Watch, Africa Watch, Asia Watch, Helsinki Watch, and Middle East Watch together comprise Human Rights Watch. Copies of the report are available for \$10 from the New York office of Human Rights Watch.]

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