

6-6-1990

Background On Guatemalan Rebels

Deborah Tyroler

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

Tyroler, Deborah. "Background On Guatemalan Rebels." (1990). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/4099>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Background On Guatemalan Rebels

by Deborah Tyroler

Category/Department: General

Published: Wednesday, June 6, 1990

According to the New York Times (06/03/90), for almost a year, the Guatemalan rebels have moved south and east from their mountain hideouts. At present, they regularly ambush army patrols, blow up bridges and sabotage electricity grid equipment. Gaspar Ilom, a top rebel commander and the son of the Nobel Prize winning novelist Miguel Angel Asturias, said in recent interviews that the guerrillas made more than 1,500 attacks in 1989. He said rebel forces also downed three army helicopters and one air force fighter last year. According to Edmond Mulet, chairperson of the National Defense Council, the rebels "are trying to prove that they still exist, that we have to deal with them if we want peace and stability." The Council exercises legislative oversight of the military. "The guerrillas' decline has stopped and some new people may be joining up," Mulet said. "They're capitalizing on some of the frustration generated by the failures of the current government." The army claims that small insurgent units almost surround Guatemala City. The rebels say they are active in 13 of Guatemala's 22 departments, up from eight three years ago. Army sources say Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) fighters in arms number 1,005 at present, a 28% increase over its 1988 estimates. Other estimates put guerrilla numbers at about 2,000. The Guatemalan insurgency began in 1961, when two renegade army lieutenants established the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR). The FAR and other rebel groups grew steadily, fed by repression, Guatemala's rigid and highly inequitable distribution of land and other productive assets, and tension between Indians and descendants of Europeans. According to the Guatemalan army, guerrilla numbers peaked at 10,000 in 1981. At that time, say officers, the rebels had "political-ideological" control over more than 200,000 collaborators or sympathizers. The URNG, an umbrella group of four rebel organizations, was formed in 1982, the same year as the military coup which brought the evangelical Gen. Rios Montt to power. The URNG is comprised of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP), the Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms (ORPA), the Guatemalan Labor Party (PGT), and the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR). Military spokespersons say the army "changed its strategy" in 1982 to "disarticulate" the insurgency. The strategy, they say, consisted of installation of military bases in the country's 22 departments, organization of civil defense patrols, and development programs sponsored by the army in civilian communities. Non-military sources, such as human rights organizations, say the army's most successful tactic in nearly destroying the rebel movement was a series of brutal counterinsurgency campaigns. Tens of thousands of rebels and civilians were killed during the campaigns, and tens of thousands more were displaced. Recent statistics released by the Guatemalan Defense Ministry say URNG forces dropped from 8,780 men in 1982, to 1,235 in 1987, and 1,005 in 1990. Meanwhile, the URNG claims to have some 4,000 men in arms. Since 1961, 100,000 Guatemalans have died, and nearly 40,000 disappeared. An estimated 120,000 children are orphans. About 45,000 Guatemalans continue as refugees in Mexico, and 300,000 Guatemalans residing in Guatemala were displaced from their home communities. (Basic data from AFP, 05/28/90, 05/29/90; Notimex, 06/01/90; New York Times, 06/03/90)

-- End --