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Guatemala: Soldiers Massacre Civilians In Santiago Atitlan, Solola Department

by Deborah Tyroler

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Dec. 2: Army sources reported that residents of Santiago Atitlan, Solola department, "revolted" for unknown reasons and attacked an army garrison. In the ensuing struggle, 10 people were killed, and 71 injured. Telesiete (local TV channel 7) reported that 25 people were killed, and that the battle was touched off by three drunken soldiers who created a disturbance. The shooting began when village residents appeared at the army post, demanding that the soldiers stop the disturbance. A report by the news agency Cerigua quoted residents as saying the three soldiers had robbed a store and attempted to abduct the shopkeeper. Relatives of the potential abduction victim woke other residents by ringing church bells. A Reuters dispatch carried in the New York Times said a crowd of local residents marched to the Panabaj military garrison just outside of town to demand that the army "leave us in peace." Soldiers responded by spraying the civilians with machinegun fire. Dec. 3: Spokespersons for President Vinicio Cerezo issued a statement expressing "profound regret" for the killings. The army was not accused of involvement. The communique said the government would conduct a thorough investigation, adding that "acts like this can be used by groups interested in disinformation at the international level." Human Rights Attorney General Ramiro de Leon Carpio said, "The bullets were undoubtedly fired from the [army] barracks." Dec. 4: De Leon Carpio told members of the Guatemalan Congress that it was evident soldiers stationed at the Panabaj military detachment were responsible for the killings in Santiago Atitlan. The official said 16 civilians were killed in the incident. De Leon Carpio also confirmed reports that the shooting began as about 3,000 civilians marched to the military post to complain that soldiers dressed as civilians tried to kidnap a local resident. Also appearing before the Congress were Santiago Atitlan mayor Delfino Rodas and mayor-elect Salvador Ramirez. They said the town's 15,000 residents had signed a letter demanding that government authorities punish the killers and relocate the barracks. Iiverio de Leon, chairperson of the congressional Commission on Indigenous Communities, admitted that "the army has left its fingerprints" on the massacre. (Basic data from AP, Cerigua, 12/02/90; AFP, 12/03/90, 12/04/90; Notimex, 12/03/90)

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