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Deborah Tyroler

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Guatemala: U.S. State Department 1990 Report On Human Rights Abuses

by Deborah Tyroler

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According to the US State Department's 1990 report on human rights in Guatemala, based on media accounts and other reliable sources, the number of homicides last year was at least three times higher than the official figure of 2,000. The report said that the Human Rights Ombudsman office estimates a total 304 political assassinations in 1990. The State Department stated that the army, police, and civil defense patrols were responsible for the majority of political murders, as well as the lion's share of other serious abuses, such as abduction and torture. The report notes that the majority of victims human rights activists, trade union activists, indigenous persons and street children were accused of supporting the rebels, "rebel sympathizers." The annual report indicated that government officials lacked the political will to curb the violence. As a result, military and paramilitary forces described as responsible for most human rights abuses acted with near total impunity. Next, the report stated that the rebels were responsible for the deaths of police officers, indiscriminate use of land mines, abduction and torture of civilians, forced recruitment, and using children in combat. In addition, the rebels were charged with failure to comply with promises to suspend economic sabotage. Among numerous unresolved cases, the report cited the 1988 El Aguacate massacre of civilians. The Guatemalan police, said the State Department report, rarely investigate cases involving soldiers. The report indicated that while the number of disappeared persons last year is not yet known, the Guatemalan government reported 2,588 disappearances in 1989. In 1990, the Human Rights Ombudsman reported 233 politically motivated disappearances. The report said that among several unresolved multiple killings is the 1988 El Aguacate civilian massacre. When the involvement of government security forces in murders and other abuses is "probable," said the report, the police are reluctant to pursue any type of meaningful investigation. According to the State Department, credible reports have been received of the existence of clandestine prisons, as well as of frequent illegal arrests and detentions. The report also points out forced recruitment by the army, the scarcity of credible information on the welfare of rebels captured by government troops, and self-censorship by the local media. (Basic data from ACAN-EFE, 03/25/91; Notimex, 03/28/91)

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