11-29-1991

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Deborah Tyroler

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Street Children In Central American Nations

by Deborah Tyroler

Category/Department: General

Published: Friday, November 29, 1991

On Nov. 14, Francisco Ramos of Casa Alianza a private halfway house for Guatemalan street children told reporters that seven of the home's residents had been severely beaten by armed men in downtown Guatemala City. He said one of the youths required hospitalization. The same child was detained by suspected National Police agents in March. Casa Alianza director Bruce Harris identified the assailants as the bodyguards of a woman whom the boy allegedly attempted to rob. Following the above incident, seven unidentified assailants visited the shelter and fired weapons in an apparent attempt to frighten residents. According to Casa Alianza administrators, 12 street children were killed between March 1990 and October 1991. The report identified the perpetrators as seven National Police officers and three civilians. Another 54 children were subjected to physical assault, arrest and "abuses of authority" by National Police officers, civilians, private security agents and military police agents. Interior Minister Fernando Hurtado recently told Radio Patrullaje Informativo that police abuse of street children was minimal. Hurtado said such reports were exaggerated, and that advocates rarely acknowledge crimes committed by street children. On Nov. 20, Casa Alianza director Harris told reporters that at least 5,000 children reside on the streets of Guatemalan cities, 1,500 each in Nicaragua and Honduras, and 750 in El Salvador. He said figures for Costa Rica, Panama, and Belize are not available. Casa Alianza has 525 residents, and provides services to another 425 children living on the street. According to a recent report by the Guatemalan Health Ministry's Women, Health and Development program, girls who live in the streets have often left home in order to escape sexual abuse perpetrated by male relatives. (Basic data from 11/04/91 report by the Guatemala Human Rights Commission (Washington, DC); Cerigua Weekly Briefs, 11/10-16/91; Agence France-Presse, ACAN-EFE, 11/14/91, 11/20/91, 11/21/91)

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