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Deborah Tyroler

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Summary Of Recent Reports On Human Rights Situation In Guatemala

by Deborah Tyroler

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Jan. 28: In his annual report to the Guatemalan congress, Human Rights Attorney General Ramiro de Leon Carpio asserted that "flagrant" human rights continue. The Human Rights Attorney General's office received 6,295 complaints of abuses in 1991. Of 2,439 killings, 553 were reportedly committed by members of the public security forces. De Leon Carpio's office completed investigations of 228 of the 553 murders attributed in some fashion to government security forces. Sufficient evidence of killings by soldiers and other security force members for political motives was found in 130 of the investigated cases, while in 27 of the 228, perpetrators apparently had no political motivation. Investigators said "subversive groups" were responsible for 71 of the 228 killings investigated. De Leon Carpio called on President Jorge Serrano to put his "promise of absolute respect for human rights and indiscriminate application of the law" into the form of concrete action. He noted that flaws in the country's socio-economic, legal and political systems "have blocked the emergence of an effective rule of law." The latter absence has in turn "thwarted the economic, social and political development of the nation...resulting in unemployment, poverty, hunger, ignorance, misery and suffering." Jan. 29: In Geneva (Switzerland), the UN Human Rights Commission cited Guatemala as one of the world's top human rights violators. Christian Tomuschat, UN human rights special investigator for Guatemala, is scheduled to submit a report on current conditions to the UN Commission on Feb. 21. Foreign Minister Gonzalo Menendez said international condemnation of Guatemalan performance would be "unfair" at this time, considering the fact that during the first year of President Serrano's administration "the [human rights] situation improved substantially." Menendez added that government delegations recently toured Europe, the US and Canada to discuss progress achieved by the Serrano government in the area of respect for human rights. Jan. 30: De Leon Carpio said Guatemala's "abysmal living conditions" are attributable to unequal and unjust socio-economic structures. He added that "human rights violations include more than the absence of...respect for life and physical integrity, but also the extreme levels of social injustice suffered by the Guatemalan population....Slow death by starvation is as bad, or worse, than extrajudicial execution." At present, said de Leon Carpio, 84% of the population lives in poverty, and 53% of all Guatemalans are illiterate. The hospital bed-population and physician-inhabitants ratios are both 1/1,000. The nation's housing deficit is over 1 million units. Of the rural population, 43% lack access to potable water, and 52% to latrines. Infant mortality is 76.2 per 1,000 live births among the majority indigenous population. Unemployment currently stands at 40%. Byron Morales, spokesperson for the Union and Popular Action Unity (UASP), said Guatemala is on the verge of a "social explosion" due to extreme inequities. He added, "The government has not invested one cent in projects which benefit the poor." Morales said, the future elimination of subsidies for public transportation and electricity and water utilities "will have disastrous consequences for Guatemalans." Jan. 31: In its annual report on human rights around the world, the US State Department said that in 1991 the Guatemalan security forces continued to be the worst human rights violators in the Americas. Abuses committed by soldiers, civilian patrol members and police officers enumerated in the report included extrajudicial execution, torture, and disappearances of human
rights and trade union activists, indigenous persons and street children, among others. President Jorge Serrano's government, said the report, has demonstrated greater political commitment than the predecessor administration in the areas of promoting human rights, prosecuting abusers, controlling the military and ending military impunity. The report noted that two soldiers were recently convicted for their role in the 1990 Santiago Atitlan massacre. Next, a member of the armed forces is currently being detained in connection with the murder of anthropologist Myrna Mack. Nevertheless, the report said members of the public security forces are rarely prosecuted for rights abuses. Next, the State Department report stated that rebels were also responsible for human rights abuses such as extrajudicial killings, including the murders of 10 civil defense patrol members. The report said "common criminals" are responsible for most violent deaths. Feb. 4: The Mutual Support Group (GAM) issued a statement condemning the Serrano administration for lacking the "moral and political capacity" to limit or reduce continual human rights violations in Guatemala. According to GAM, "Threats against popular leaders, disappearances and assassinations are an everyday occurrence." In addition, forced military recruitment, forced exile and assassination attempts affect thousands of Guatemalans. [Basic data from Prensa Latina (Cuba), 01/30/92; Agence France-Presse, 01/28/92, 01/31/92; ACAN-EFE, 01/29-02/01/92, 02/04/92]