11-12-1998

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Report Shows CIA Knew of Abuses by Honduran Military in 1980s

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Honduras
Published: 1998-11-12

Declassified material shows that employees of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) were aware of human rights abuses committed by the Honduran military in the 1980s and that the US government sponsored a secret police unit to ferret out suspected leftists. Former CIA director John M. Deutch ordered the report prepared after US newspapers claimed the CIA trained a Honduran military unit known as Battalion 316, which has been linked to death-squad activities (see NotiSur, 01/03/95 and 08/04/95).

On Oct. 22, after a four-year delay, the CIA gave Honduran human rights commissioner Leo Valladares a 220-page report on what the CIA knew of the military's abuses. Since Valladares issued his 1993 report on human rights abuses committed by the Honduran military in the 1980s, he has pressed the CIA to supply evidence to bring suspected officers to trial. Until now, documents the CIA turned over to him were of little value (see NotiCen, 09/25/97). The report, which was also given to the Washington-based National Security Archive, was written by former CIA inspector general Fred Hitz.

The recently declassified material on which much of the report is based confirms that military officers tortured and killed guerrilla leader Jose Maria Reyes Mata in 1983, but the names of the officers are blacked out. The officer who executed Reyes was referred to only as a "field commander." The inspector general did not find evidence to either affirm or deny that a CIA field officer was present during the interrogation as press reports have alleged. A US official said the government would provide Honduras with additional information on the Reyes case through human rights organizations but did not say how precise it would be in identifying the Honduran officers.

The report sheds less light on the death of US priest James F. Carney who acted as chaplain to the guerrilla unit Reyes led into Honduras (see Central America Update, 07/06/88). According to the report, Carney was either executed or died of starvation before the guerrilla band was captured.

"The precise fate of Carney remains unknown to the CIA," said the report. The existence of the declassified CIA information shows for the first time that CIA officials knew the military-backed death squads existed but either downplayed their activities or did not pass the information on to CIA headquarters or to congressional oversight committees.

"The Honduran military committed hundreds of human rights abuses since 1980, many of which were politically motivated and officially sanctioned," said the report. US backed a special anticomunist "army" within the military. The report also revealed that the US set up a unit called Ejercito de Liberacion Anticomunista de Honduras (ELACH) within the military's now defunct secret police (Direccion Nacional de Investigaciones, DNI).
ELACH carried out kidnappings, torture, and assassinations of suspected subversives. The existence of the unit was until now unknown in Honduras. Despite the CIA's refusal to supply names of the officers involved in the abuses, Valladares welcomed the report. "I think this is another step toward discovering the truth that [the CIA] has been hiding for a long time," he said.

Under legislation defeated recently in the US Senate, the CIA would have been required to reveal the names of those involved in Reyes' execution, noted Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-CT). Dodd and 20 other senators co-sponsored a bill that would have sped up declassification of secret documents and would have prohibited the CIA from withholding information on human rights violations based on the need to protect intelligence sources. [Sources: Associated Press, 10/24/98; El Tiempo (Honduras), 10/24/98, 10/24/98; The Washington Post, 11/04/98]