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Civil Defense Patrols Return

by LADB Staff

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Members of the disbanded Civil Defense Patrols, (Patrullas de Auto-Defensas Civiles , PAC) have reorganized to demand money for services rendered to the Guatemalan Army during the civil war that ended with the signing of peace accords in December 1996.

On June 17, thousands of former patrulleros blocked main roads in the Peten, largest of Guatemala's departments. The protests shut down the local airport, the main tourist attractions of the area including famed archaeological site Tikal, and an oil facility. The protestors demanded payment of 20,000 quetzales each (about US\$2,600) for services rendered to the state, but which were not compensable in the peace accords. The accords set the conditions for the aftermath of the 36 year-old war.

Those services included massacres of entire villages thought to be supportive of rebel forces, restriction of civilian movements between villages and markets, and pursuit of fleeing refugees. There was no physical violence at the outset of the demonstration, but there were threats to burn down the Basic Resources of the Peten oil facility, if the National Civil Police (PNC) or the army attempted to break-up the protest.

Basic Resources shut down its operation, which pumps crude from the Peten oil-fields to the to the Guatemalan Caribbean coast for shipment. The protest amounted to a virtual takeover of the Peten. News reports from the region said no one could enter or leave by air or land. The only aircraft permitted to land were a plane that brought in government negotiators from the capital and a news helicopter. Thousands of cars were temporarily abandoned, stopped in their tracks everywhere around the four points where the mobs had gathered. Hundreds of tourists clamored to be allowed through to their destinations, or to be liberated from the ruins of Tikal.

Government offers immediate response

Although neither the peace accords nor any other agreement requires it, the government responded immediately and sympathetically to the demonstration, perhaps sensing the danger should the protests spread to paralyze the entire country.

Former interior minister Eduardo Arevalo Lacs framed the demonstrations as non-violent. "It is a demand of peasants, which the government must hear, said Lacs. "We hope that they don't generalize to the whole country." Lacs was a member of the government negotiation team. The other members were; Jorge Perez, executive secretary of the Presidency; Luis Miranda, director of Inguat, the tourism department; Gabriel Aguilera, Secretary of The Peace; and Edgar Gutierrez, Secretary of Strategic Analysis.

Lacs' opinion of the nature of the demonstration notwithstanding, the potential for violence was explicit. "If [the President] wants war, he'll have it. We have people in the mountains ready to receive orders," said PAC spokesperson Rosenda del Carmen Perez Valles. "If they attack us, we're going to defend ourselves with arms." Perez Valles is known to be a powerful leader in command of the former patrulleros. The government, however, appears not to have considered the option of attacking the PAC, which at one time numbered more than a million members.

Presidential spokesman Byron Barrera told reporters that the administration had been discussing compensation with the ex-PACs for some time, but "the basic problem is financing, and the government doesn't have resources to meet the patrulleros' demand."

On June 19 the protesters stood down, agreeing to meet with President Alfonso Portillo in Guatemala City on June 21, and releasing the flow of oil, cars, planes, and tourists. The agreement to meet came at a political cost to Portillo. Opposition leaders called the speed with which Portillo acceded to the demands as "suspicious," since he had never done so before in similar protests.

More criticism centered on the leader of the ruling Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG), General Efraín Ríos Montt, who was appointed to the presidency (1982-1983) following a military coup. Aside from having commanded the PAC, Ríos is generally known to have designs on the presidency himself. He has tried to run before, but was stopped by a constitutional provision that bars one who has taken the presidency by coup from running. He is said to have hopes that a new high court ruling will clear his path. During the early 1980s, there were about 1,200,000 PAC members, now a substantial political base.

Constitutionally ineligible to succeed himself, Portillo bore up under the political and social reaction, but has yet to find a formula for raising the money to pay off the PAC. The protesters rejected out of hand any suggestion that they would be satisfied with housing allocations or other social benefits as payment. With cash the only option, the private sector has stated publicly that it would not tolerate scarce funds being spent in this way.

A solution initially proposed by Portillo was to tax checks written on Guatemalan banks. But the president quickly withdrew this proposal in the face of overwhelming negative reaction from business and banking organizations. The tax plan scuttled, the government next floated an alternative strategy to raise the still uncertain sum to pay the PAC members.

Finance Minister Eduardo Weymann said that a bond issue would be prepared for the European market. Last November Guatemala floated a US\$325 million 10-year bond to bail out the ailing coffee sector on the Luxembourg exchange. It was received at a rate of 10.25%. Weymann emphasized that the cost to the economy of the new bond would be acceptable to international financiers, since the International Monetary Fund does not consider a government to be dangerously indebted until its debts amount to 50% of GDP. Guatemala's current external debt amounts to about 21%. There have as yet been no reliable estimates of the number of PAC members who would be eligible for benefits, nor is there an agreement on a formula for compensation.

An outpouring of disagreement

By July 31, MINUGUA, the UN mission in Guatemala, issued a statement expressing concern that, "the government has identified the ex-members as a group associated with grave violations of human rights to be beneficiaries of a special compensation," while the national program of reparation for victims, reconciliation and reparation, have languished (see NotiCen, 2002-05-30). Nobel peace laureate Rigoberta Menchu followed on with her own condemnation of the plan, as did other well-known organizations and individuals.

The government's stated objective of preventing the spread of PAC reorganization was not to be met, however. There is ample evidence that the Portillo administration's swift capitulation encouraged groups from the war-ravaged highlands of Huehuetenango, to Jutiapa in the eastern portion of the country, an area of scant action during the 36 years of conflict.

By mid-August, 3,000 former PAC members in Coban, Alta Verapaz, gathered to make public their demand for 20,000 quetzales apiece. The rhetoric included the announcement that a formal demand had already been delivered to the president reminding him of the commitments he has made to their cohorts in other departments, and specific threats of taking overt measures should their demands go unheeded. "We will wait until Sept 15," said a speaker, "and if nothing is clear, we will take drastic measures."

Similar gatherings emerged on the same day in Chimaltenango and Tecpan, in Guatemala's midsection, in what now appears to be a well-coordinated nationwide movement. Many of the places where these protests have occurred evoke images of egregious atrocities committed by the PAC. But many of the former patrulleros were forced into participation under threat of having done to them what their country had them do to others.

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