

# Democracy a slim hope in Guatemala Even a long-time ally like the U.S. is repulsed by Guatemala's murderous army

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

On July 28, the U.S. state department (ideologically not an institution regarded as leaning to the left) issued a report on human rights which was distributed to the media by staff working at the American embassy. The report states that, in 1990, sources the U.S. deems reliable estimate that 6,000 people were assassinated in Guatemala, 500 a month, 15 a day.

The latter scenario assumes the spectre of a nightmare with the arrival in Guatemala of cholera. In an odd geographical diffusion, the disease entered Guatemala not (as expected) from the south but from the north, moving "down" from Mexico as opposed to "up" through Central America from Peru (the country of origin of the current epidemic), Ecuador, and Colombia.

The Suchiate River, which forms part of Guatemala's western border with Mexico, has been found to be contaminated, and health officials are clamping down on public eating facilities following a survey which reported that nine of every 10 plates of food sold by street vendors (there are 13,000 alone in and around Guatemala City) contain fecal matter.

## FULL TEXT

AT THE ENTRANCE to the military base in Chimaltenango, one of myriad visual reminders of who really holds power in Guatemala, a slogan reads: Some people think about peace - We work for her.

The notion of an army most qualified observers consider a perpetual violator of human rights holding itself up as an agent of peace is incongruous in the extreme, but Guatemala is a country which abounds in such Orwellian manipulation.

After more than six months in office, President Jorge Serrano Elias seems no more capable of controlling his nation's armed forces than was his predecessor Vinicio Cerezo. Political killings and intimidations continue at an alarming rate, reflecting the government's inability or fear to act.

Failure to investigate the circumstances of a crime and then to press charges, especially if the army is implicated, lie at the root of Guatemala's human rights morass, as has long been recognized.

The record of the Cerezo government's last year in office serves as a fitting point of departure from which to evaluate Serrano's first half-year as president.

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report on human rights which was distributed to the media by staff working at the American embassy. The report states that, in 1990, sources the U.S. deems reliable estimate that 6,000 people were assassinated in Guatemala, 500 a month, 15 a day.

Most damning, however, was the report's willingness to categorize 304 assassinations as overtly political, and to attribute blame for these killings directly to the national armed forces, or to individuals associated with them and therefore protected by them.

The report went on to emphasize that the army, and for the most part the police also, are exempt from prosecution in cases of human rights violations, which effectively means that the rule of law operates with serious restriction.

A week before the state department's report, Guatemala's own human rights ombudsman, Ramior de Len Carpio, drew public attention to more than 300 "extra judicial killings" between Jan. 1 and June 30, 1991.

He also pointed out that two of every three depositions brought to his attention fell beyond his office's terms of reference, which caused him to be very wary of designating Serrano's presidency one in which, thus far, "significant improvement" may be observed. Hundreds of killings reported by the local press went without any kind of official inquiry.

If Len Carpio's statement did not please members of Serrano's administration, neither did remarks he made earlier about "unconstitutional" recruitment go over well with the army high command, many of whose 40,000 rank and file are abducted into service. The outspokenness of someone in Len Carpio's position is rare. Far more than most, he knows the price paid by Guatemalans who dare to address the harrowing consequences of the civilian-military alliance.

One particularly repugnant assassination in July was that of agronomist Julio Quevedo Quezada, murdered in front of his wife and children by two gunmen while on his way to visit his parents in Santa Cruz del Quiche.

The shooting of Quevedo, a prominent member of the Catholic relief agency CARITAS, provoked strong condemnation from Monsignor Prspero del Barrio, Archbishop of Guatemala. He lashed out at the impunity that the culprits of the deed would likely enjoy, stating: "Crimes such as this are never resolved, for the authorities always tell us they will investigate and everything ends right there, which means the identity of the killers is never determined nor is anyone apprehended."

Having the will to prosecute means taking enormous risks, as lawyer Roberto Arturo Lemus can attest. He, like Quevedo, also worked in El Quiche, where he represented Maya Indians who wished to bring to justice members of the army's civil defence patrol accused of the murder and harassment of fellow community residents. Shortly after overseeing the necessary legal proceedings, Lemus and his family received multiple death threats. On July 15, Lemus left Guatemala for exile in Canada.

So appalling is the human rights situation that the U.S. has once again decided to suspend all military aid to Guatemala and to impose conditions on programs of economic assistance. A non-military package amounting to \$56.6 million in 1990 has been cut to \$30 million for 1991.

This reduction has served to cool relations between the two countries considerably and can only exacerbate the already dismal plight of the Guatemalan economy.

Surveys of working conditions by local and international agencies reckon that 65 per cent of the population is underemployed, three out of every four workers earning wages of only \$2.50 (Canadian) daily. These starvation incomes inevitably result in horrifying statistics of deprivation: 86 per cent of families live below the poverty line, 68 per cent of them in conditions officially described as extreme, without access to clean water and even rudimentary medical services.

The latter scenario assumes the spectre of a nightmare with the arrival in Guatemala of cholera. In an odd geographical diffusion, the disease entered Guatemala not (as expected) from the south but from the north, moving "down" from Mexico as opposed to "up" through Central America from Peru (the country of origin of the current epidemic), Ecuador, and Colombia.

The first confirmed case was that of Gabriel Zacarias Mendez, a resident of San Marcos who had returned to Guatemala after a period of work on a farm in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. Zacarias was admitted to hospital in Guatemala City on July 21, where he was taken off the critical list four days later, following intensive treatment that turned the migrant worker into a temporary celebrity.

His expensive, "high tech" recovery will not be a fate shared by other Guatemalans. By Aug. 4, 16 more cases had been confirmed and were being attended in Coatepeque.

The Suchiate River, which forms part of Guatemala's western border with Mexico, has been found to be contaminated, and health officials are clamping down on public eating facilities following a survey which reported that nine of every 10 plates of food sold by street vendors (there are 13,000 alone in and around Guatemala City) contain fecal matter.

Cholera could thrive under such conditions and cause many more deaths in Guatemala than in any other afflicted country.

President Serrano presides over Guatemala during a time of ongoing crisis. On the positive side, perhaps his most important achievement so far is in organizing face-to-face talks in Mexico with representatives of the guerrilla insurgency which have waged war against the system for years.

An "historic accord" signed on July 25 in Queretaro, under the auspices of the United Nations, spelled out a common platform relating to issues of "democratization." Significantly, four signatories for the Guatemalan government were members of the national armed forces. Only if their institution truly decides to work for peace will any prospect of a better Guatemala be possible.

\* W. George Lovell is a member of the Department of Geography at Queen's University. He returned recently from a month's field work in Guatemala.

## Illustration

Caption: Sygma photo Guatemalan peasant with hands bound

## DETAILS

**People:** Elias, Jorge Serrano Carpio, Len Quezada, Julio Quevedo Lemus, Roberto Arturo

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