

La vida no vale nada.

— Graffiti on a garbage truck,
Antigua, Guatemala

TOMORROW, AS Canadians everywhere remember and celebrate Confederation, Guatemalans go to the polls to elect members for a National Constituent Assembly. The July 1 election in Guatemala is not one the outside world has heard much about. It will be held without the media extravaganza that accompanied similar elections in El Salvador two years ago, and may even unfold without the triumphal blessing the United States government has recently accredited the "democratic process" elsewhere in Central America. What this illustrates quite dramatically is how peripheral an issue Guatemala has become of late compared to its more "newsworthy" neighbors. Addressing a conference in Montreal last March, a lawyer representing the Guatemalan trade union movement went so far as to say that word of his country's tragedy had yet to penetrate the international press in any significant way.

The reasons for this are by no means easy to determine. Consideration of two sets of factors, however, offers a tentative explanation.

There is first the problem of media coverage. No story can be told if a journalist is not on the spot to record and disseminate it. Guatemala is a complex beat for any journalist, not least for those foreign correspondents who arrive ill-prepared one day and expect (or are expected) to cable home a scoop two days later. Anyone wishing to make sense of the situation must speak Spanish, have reliable contacts, know how to corroborate what is told them and spend lots of time piecing often conflicting parts of the puzzle together.

Guatemala is also a dangerous beat. While, as yet, no foreign correspondents have been killed, a number of Guatemalan journalists have been murdered or have disappeared in pursuit of their craft. In Guatemala, threats of death are not meant, nor should they be taken, idly. Any correspondent who, from 1980 on, has filed reports critical of the government's handling of the current situation, especially those whose reward has been a grisly warning to leave the country, will sensibly think twice about a return visit.

The second problem is related to the way the U.S. administration views events in Central America and how it wishes to see the crisis resolved. With no concrete evidence to back up his inflexible position and with breathtaking disdain for the lessons of history, President Ronald Reagan attributes political turmoil in Central America to an international communist conspiracy the roots of which, he believes, can be traced to Havana and Moscow. Because, in his mind, a red blight now rages in every banana republic, effective extermination of the alien pest must be undertaken as part of a regional initiative.

The key word here (a geographer's delight) is regional. Efforts to combat, halt and reverse the spread of Marxism must be coordinated, with



Most of Guatemala's 'internal refugees' belong to one of 23 Indian groups

GUATEMALA

Bleeding in silence

By W. GEORGE LOVELL

'Flagrant violation of human rights in Guatemala continues unabated, though the attention of the world's press has been diverted to more "newsworthy" areas of Central America'

one country reinforcing another's position and presenting the repugnant invader with a united challenge. Thus, with Nicaragua cast as a Soviet proxy and labelled the regional source of instability, the United States has succeeded in forging an operational alliance between Honduras, El Salvador and Costa Rica.

The Guatemalan military, however, has not been easily seduced by U.S. overtures; it has resisted pressures to view the struggle in America's "backyard" as exclusively a regional problem. Fiercely nationalistic and, in their own way, staunchly anti-American, the armed forces of Guatemala pride themselves in having enacted a ruthless counter-insurgency without significant assistance, in matériel and counsel, from

the United States. What this means is that the Americanization of the conflict is not nearly as advanced in Guatemala as it is in El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua. Since so much media coverage of Central America highlights escalating U.S. involvement and the concerted efforts of the Reagan administration to make the issue a regional one, Guatemala, because of its government's desire to fight its own battles and leave others to fight theirs, has tended not to figure prominently in discussion and analysis.

Guatemala may no longer be considered a priority subject by newspaper editors and White House advisers, but this does not mean all is well. Reports from both Guatemalan and Canadian sources indicate, if any-

thing, quite the reverse.

Human rights

The flagrant violation of human rights in Guatemala continues unabated. The hands of the present regime, headed by General Oscar Mejia Victores, are so bloody that many Guatemalans compare the state terror they live with today to that which they endured between 1978 and 1982 under the pariah regime of General Romeo Lucas Garcia. Essentially, Mejia Victores, who ousted General Efraim Rios Montt in a military coup last August, has not dealt with legitimate demands for social justice any differently than did his predecessors. To the 27,000 killings under Lucas Garcia and an estimated 10,000 under Rios Montt must now be added thousands more under Victores. Violence lurks at every turn as the election campaign proceeds.

A few items from the Guatemalan press reveal the violent setting of the election. Given the risks that journalists inside the country have to confront on a daily basis, one can hardly expect the national media to be overly critical or analytical of the present situation. Yet this hard-hitting editorial appeared a few months ago in *El Gráfico*, one of Guatemala City's most popular daily newspapers:

The violence has to end

There is an obvious fear among the people about the increase of violence that has manifest itself in the past several weeks. It is feared that a resurgence of violence may influence the process of democratization, a process which will pass through a crucial stage in the form of an election, called for July 1, to designate members for a National Constituent Assembly. Fear reigns because no one knows what will be the consequences of this new wave of violence that has claimed so many lives in such a short period of time.

Many are those who have been kidnapped or killed in the last few days alone. The image invoked by General Rios Montt during his spell in the presidency after the coup d'état of March 23 — "no more bodies on the roadside" — has now lost all meaning. Many are the bodies found along highways and down ravines. Many are the Guatemalans — professional people, students, workers, farmers — who are kidnapped in broad daylight in the middle of the street, in full public view of a helpless and fearful citizenry. Many are the Guatemalans who are abducted from their very homes under cover of darkness. Many are the wives, many are the mothers, many are the children who appear in court with the personal effects of their missing relatives, demanding to know their whereabouts. And many also are the people who visit the morgues in an attempt to identify, in the features of the dead, the face of a loved one who has disappeared.

The above editorial, published in *El Gráfico* on Feb. 23, was followed

March 2 by another, equally as frank:

The kidnappings must cease

Kidnapping as a political weapon or as a means of attaining financial ransom is deplorable from any point of view. Many Guatemalans, among them several university professors and students, have been kidnapped during the past few weeks in a renewed outbreak of violence that is sweeping the country. The number of these victims has multiplied at an alarming rate. Of the victims, very few have been fortunate enough to show up alive; many have yet to reappear alive or dead. Anguish spreads through the homes of the disappeared, inflicting pain on an impotent citizenry that witnesses the spectacle of violence without being able to do anything about it.

The incidence of these kidnappings, which occur with an elaborate display of force in broad daylight, indicates the degree to which violence has escalated. The citizenry is frightened. It feels insecure and has lost all trust. Guatemala has been afflicted for many years by a lack of security and by a feeling of defenselessness on the part of its population. If these kidnappings and murders persist, peace-making will be impossible and we will continue to represent, in the eyes of the world, a country where human rights are violated and where the lives of ordinary people are simply not respected.

As well as outspoken editorial opinion, *El Gráfico* carried stories in February and March which paint a horrific (though depressingly familiar) picture of Guatemalan reality. Among these vignettes of violence was one in which the victim of an assassination attempt was abducted from the hospital in which he was recovering by a group of armed men disguised as doctors. One full page in the Feb. 23 issue of *El Gráfico* documented the kidnapping of 38 peasants from Indian communities in the western highlands, reported the discovery of the beaten and bullet-ridden body of a university professor and described a shoot-out in downtown Guatemala City.

On March 2 *El Gráfico* also reported that the man in charge of overseeing tomorrow's vote, Arturo Herbruger Asturias, had received threats against his life for assuming the presidency of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal.

If the above incidents are harrowing, even more chilling is the assessment, made by Guatemalan clergy, that approximately one million people (of a national population of 7.5 million) have been displaced from their homes as a result of the lethal counter-insurgency unleashed over the past three years by the armed forces. The vast majority of these "internal" refugees belong to one of Guatemala's 23 different Indian groups, descendants of the ancient Maya who flee from the lands of their forefathers to escape the wrath of a military machine which considers them communist sympathizers and which brings about their extermination in the most bestial and barba-

rous ways imaginable. Any popular base the guerrillas previously enjoyed has been greatly eroded by the bombardment of native communities, the burning of crops and supplies, the slaughter of livestock and the destruction of personal belongings.

The Indians of the western highlands are today, many of them, hungry and dispossessed as well as widowed or orphaned. Some have sought refuge from the carnage in the mountains surrounding their communities, in the squatter settlements of Guatemala City, in the plantations and estates of the Pacific coast and (about 50,000 to 100,000 of them) in "external" refugee camps along the Mexican border. Others consider their best long-term chance of survival is to serve as "volunteers" in one of the civil defence patrols, now 500,000 men strong, organized by the armed forces to help police the countryside. Even to the highland Maya, a people for whom conquest and subjugation have for centuries been a way of life, the cultural impact of these profound dislocations has been devastating.

Here in Canada some recognition of the gravity of the situation was revealed earlier this month in a report prepared by the Inter-Church Committee on Human Rights in Latin America (ICCHRLA). Presented June 12 to External Affairs Minister Allan MacEachen, the ICCHRLA report explicitly states:

In the case of Guatemala, the internal human rights situation remains the most serious in Central America. Through recent ICCHRLA visits and through the testimony of refugees, including an escapee from a clandestine prison now resident in Canada, details of torture, kidnappings, detentions and disappearances in the thousands during the early part of 1984 have been recorded. Continued massacres in the countryside, and of the responsibility of the armed forces themselves for these violations, have been documented by ICCHRLA in conversations with religious personnel working in several areas of Guatemala. The refugee flow and the weight upon Mexico in particular continue to be matters of priority humanitarian concern. The more than 70 documented incursions by Guatemalan military forces into Mexico, including the April 30 attack on a refugee camp several kilometers inside Mexico resulting in grotesque tortures and deaths, should provoke strong international reaction.

Election day

It is in the midst of such a bleak state of affairs that elections will be held tomorrow in Guatemala. One cannot help but ask: how valid is an election held under such dismal circumstances? Who will participate? What is the ideological range of the competing parties? Is a National Constituent Assembly likely to improve the situation outlined above after the election is over?

The first thing to be said is that tomorrow's vote will be the first major

electoral event in Guatemala since the abortive presidential election of March 7, 1982. Rampant fraud in the course of that election precipitated a military coup two weeks later that brought Rios Montt to power. Only the naive would rule out the possibility that tomorrow's vote will not be tampered with.

As for participation, some 2.5 million registered voters will be asked to choose among 1,179 candidates representing no fewer than 17 political parties. While one may at first think such figures indicate significant potential involvement, the impression of widespread participation is illusory. Through fear of being showered with bullets instead of ballots, no left of centre parties dare field candidates. Right-wing groups predomi-

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nate, as is evidenced by such revealing names as the Anti-Communist Unification Party and the Authentic Nationalist Party. Moreover, anyone elected to represent a moderate centrist party, of which there are a handful, will henceforth live in fear of assassination at the hands of a right-wing death squad.

One of tomorrow's contenders is General Anibal Guevara Rodriguez, the "winner" of the fraudulent presidential election two years ago. (Although he was president-elect, Guevara never assumed office because of the junior officers' coup d'état of March 23, 1982.) Another contender tomorrow is General Carlos Manuel Arana Osorio, a former president nicknamed the "Butcher of Zacapa" because of his callous rooting-out of "subversion" in Guatemala in the late 1960s. The participation of Guevara and Arana reduces even more what little credibility the procedures might have had without their involvement. So irrelevant is an election at this juncture in Guatemalan political life that all who participate do so in the full knowledge that nothing in the country is likely to change. The assembly will not recommend a negotiated ceasefire between the government and the guerrillas. No meaningful dialogue will be proposed, no serious reformist legislation to alter the gross inequalities responsible for unrest will be tabled. The killing will simply go on.

Perhaps the greatest danger in tomorrow's election lies in it being perceived as an opportunity for the U.S. government to reintegrate Guate-

mala more fully into its plans for the Central American region as a whole. Should the White House greet the election results with loud fanfare and should General Mejia Victores then respond to Washington's call for Guatemala to assume a more central regional role, the only guarantee for the Guatemalan people is even greater repression than they already experience. In this regard, the response of the Reagan Administration will be crucial.

As for Canada, Ottawa's position toward Guatemala has been one of increasing detachment and censure, beginning two years ago with the suspension of bilateral aid. With respect to Central America in general, the Canadian government has moved to distance itself somewhat from the hard line of the United States, even if, in the words of analyst Tim Drainin, Ottawa's policy in the region is still "cautious, confused, contradictory and ineffectual." Canadians who are concerned about their country's stance on Central America can derive some encouragement from a recent speech in Washington by Quebec MP Maurice Dupras, chairman of the parliamentary subcommittee for Canada's Relations with Latin America and the Caribbean. Mincing no words, Mr. Dupras told his audience:

It hardly needs to be said that it is Washington, not Moscow, that has been for many decades the dominant outside power south of the Rio Grande, and nowhere more so than in Central America. Washington's policies in the region closest to it have produced a bloody shambles rather than the intended result of social stability and political acquiescence. There is no area of the world more ripe for revolutionary change. This is the case despite decades during which the United States has not hesitated to employ its immense military, economic and political influence in the region. Yet, when challenged, President Reagan's stock response is to resort to ideological formulas. History notwithstanding, he reaffirms his simple belief that "the Soviet Union underlies all the unrest that is going on." Progress toward needed reforms will be very difficult without a fundamental change in the attitude of the U.S. government. That means putting faith in the people rather than in military oligarchs with blood on their hands.

In stressing the need for the United States to live with, rather than subvert, revolutionary change in Central America, Mr. Dupras strikes at the heart of the problem. Discontent here springs from generations of poverty and justice, not a mythical Soviet presence. Not until the Reagan administration realizes that what people throughout Central America struggle for today is the same cause Americans themselves fought for two centuries ago will the bleeding stop and the nightmare end. □

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