

GUATEMALA:

The sunshine and the shadow

Story and photos by DONALD McALPINE

*Where some have found their paradise
Others just come to harm*

Joni Mitchell, Amelia

*Yet people can bear almost everything,
although almost everything leaves its
mark on them, almost everything brings
them closer to death.*

Josef Skvorecky, The Bass Saxophone

ON SEPT. 29, the department of external affairs announced that dependents of Canadian diplomats in Guatemala had been flown home following a spate of intimidating letters and telephone calls. Ottawa had in all probability acted wisely; in Guatemala, such threats are not meant, and dare not be taken, idly. Canada, hitherto little touched by the horrendous political violence currently sweeping Guatemala, was now directly affected. The families of some diplomats had even received bouquets of yellow flowers, which in Guatemala symbolize death and are customarily sent only to express condolences at funerals. Bizarre and macabre. But sadly commonplace in the grisly realities of contemporary Guatemalan life.

Although denied by external affairs, it is likely that the death threats communicated to Canadian diplomats and their next of kin are connected to the death in Guatemala on July 25 of the lay missionary Raul Joseph Leger, a native of Bouctouche, New Brunswick. Mr. Leger, 30, was killed, along with several other people, by Guatemalan security forces who later claimed that Leger was actively involved in the armed struggle waged against the ruling oligarchy of Guatemala by radical guerrilla organizations. Citing Mr. Leger (and, by extension, Canada) as yet another example of left-wing foreign extremists meddling in its internal affairs (Nicaragua, Cuba and the Soviet Union had already been widely implicated) the Guatemalan authorities wished the matter pursued no further.

Canada, understandably, was not entirely satisfied with the official explanation of Leger's death and asked the Guatemalan government that a full inquiry be made into the circumstances surrounding his shooting. The precise nature of Leger's involvement in Guatemala will possibly never satisfactorily be known. Certainly Leger's personal background and character, as sketched by family and friends in the wake of the incident, do not suggest the diabolical stuff of which revolutionaries are made. What does seem clear, however, is that the Guatemalan authorities did not react kindly to the utterings of their Canadian



Indian boy, Solola Market: Bearing the brunt of repression

counterparts for a detailed investigation into the Leger case. In a country where the government itself has repeatedly been shown to be the primary orchestrator of terror and repression, no one is exempt from death threats. Not even the diplomatic staff of a nation long regarded as a friend. Such is, and has been for some time, the bittersweet face of Guatemala.

The historical setting

The third largest but most populous of all the Central American republics, Guatemala has approximately 7.2 million inhabitants, about half of whom are of Mayan Indian extraction. Ladinos, persons of mixed Spanish and Indian descent, comprise the majority of the remainder, with a small but powerful group of pure-blooded or almost pure-blooded whites and some scattered blacks completing the racial picture.

Predominantly Indian communities (some 23 distinct language groups in all) are to be found in the

rugged highland region to the north and west of the capital, Guatemala City, with Ladinos most numerous in the east of the country (the Oriente), in the Costa Sur (the Pacific "South Coast"), and in the Petén lowlands far to the north. Cultural diversity is matched by physical diversity. Just as anthropologists marvel at the richness and uniqueness of indigenous culture, so naturalists stand in awe of the myriad splendors of the Guatemalan landscape.

The impact is always striking, often disconcerting. The simple, land-oriented lives of the Indians and their day-to-day concerns seem far removed from the affairs of Ladinio businessmen and shopkeepers in the capital; the trees, flowers, birds and other living creatures inhabiting the cool volcanic highlands to the west of Guatemala City seem to belong to a different planet from those inhabiting the hot and humid coastal lowlands or the Petén rainforest.

In this regard, Guatemala all too vividly reflects the stark, contradic-

tory, separate realities that comprise much of Latin America, a vast, complex realm of sunshine and shadow, of blessing and blight. To know Guatemala is to be confronted by a perplexing, irresolvable array of dualities: rich and poor, strong and weak, ancient and modern, gentle and cruel. The bell tolls discord and harmony. Beauty and squalor, abundance and deprivation.

To a greater or lesser degree, this is how it has always been. To portray pre-Columbian Guatemala as some kind of romantic, Rousseau-like arcadia would be little more than an exercise in delusion. The noble savage died a long, long time ago. He and she probably never existed. Certainly the pre-Columbian Maya of Guatemala were an advanced and civilised human assortment, well adjusted — socially and materially — to an environment which was as much a part of them as they were of it.

The Maya lived, as do many of their descendants still, not so much on or from, but *with* the land, tied intimately to it by an almost mystical sense of belonging. They built sophisticated and complex settlements, not cities as we know them today, but ceremonial centres around which dense populations eked out an existence based nutritionally on the age-old trinity of the American Indian: maize, beans and squash. Their remarkable achievements in sedentary agriculture, in astronomy, mathematics, sculpture and in a host of other physical and intellectual endeavors rightly demand our respect. But ancient Maya society was based firmly on the government of the many by the few, whether in the fairly peaceful Classic period of AD 300-1000, when a priesthood constituted the ruling elite, or in the more belligerent Postclassic era of AD 1000-1524, when militaristic not theological might characterised the ranks of the elite. Even if, as in Inca culture and civilization, the common majority lived under a benevolent despotism, there must certainly have been a price to pay, in terms of personal liberty and freedom of expression, for the adequate provision of food, housing, clothing and the assignation of land and work.

Colonial experience

The Spanish conquest of Guatemala, begun by Pedro de Alvarado in 1524, signified for the Maya the beginning of an era in which benevolence vanished but despotism remained. Historian Benjamin Keen, from the standpoint of 20th-century

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'In a country where the government itself has repeatedly been shown to be the primary orchestrator of terror and repression, no one is exempt from death threats'



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scholarship, asserts that, "Spanish demands for labor and tribute were immeasurably greater than before the conquest, simply, aside from other reasons, because pre-conquest tribute demands were limited by the capacity of the native ruling classes to consume the fruits of tribute and labor, whereas as the Spanish demands, aimed at the accumulation of wealth in monetary form, were quite unlimited." We have the testimony of the Indians themselves, who, in a 16th-century chronicle, lament that:

Little by little heavy shadows and black night enveloped our fathers and grandfathers and us also. Oh, my sons! when . . . the Spaniards arrived . . . Then Tunatiuh (Alvarado) asked the kings for money. He wished them to give him piles of metal, their vassals and crowns. And as they did not bring them to him immediately, Tunatiuh became angry with the kings and said to them: "Why have you not brought me the metal? If you do not bring with you all of the money of the tribes, I will burn you and I will hang you," he said to the lords. Next Tunatiuh ordered them to pay twelve hundred pesos of gold. The kings tried to have the amount reduced and they began to weep, but Tunatiuh did not consent, and he said to them: "Get the metal and bring it within five days. Woe to you if you do not bring it! I know my heart!" Thus he said to the lords.

Whereas the conquest of Mexico had been executed with a prompt and ruthless efficiency, Spanish subjugation of the indigenous peoples of Guatemala was made an arduous, protracted affair by the political fragmentation of the region, a fragmentation which, prior to the arrival of the forces led by Pedro de Alvarado, had resulted in open hostilities between rival Mayan groups, especially between the Quiché and the Cakchiquel. Unlike his commanding officer Hernán Cortés in Mexico, whose defeat of the Aztecs did much to hasten the surrender of other Mexican peoples, Alvarado in Guatemala had no single, dominant Indian group to conquer. Rather, a number of small but tenacious groups had to be overcome. Successful domination

of the Quiché, the first important Indian group to succumb, was followed by a series of laborious campaigns against such peoples as the Tzutuhil, the Pocomán, the Mam, the Cakchiquel (initially Spanish allies who revolted in 1526 after suffering two years of abuse at the hands of their European masters), the Ixil, the Uspantec and the Kekchi.

As throughout the New World, the Spaniards were greatly assisted in the conquest of the Maya by the ravages of Old World diseases, inadvertently introduced by the Europeans, on the immunologically defenseless autochthonous population. Epidemics of smallpox, typhus, measles, mumps and pulmonary plague, the "shock troops" of the conquest, occurred throughout the first half of the 16th century, decimating the native population and thus reducing substantially both Indian numbers and

"Epidemics of smallpox and typhus, the 'shock troops' of the Spanish conquest, decimated the native population, reducing the Indians' ability to fight the invasion force"

their ability to fight against the alien invasion force. A superior military apparatus, together with a shrewd sense of when and how to employ the men and equipment at their disposal, also did much to ensure Spanish victory. The physical and psychological impact of cavalry on peoples who had never before seen a horse and its rider in combat was as devastating as the material superiority of steel and firearms over the bow and arrow. Brave and stubborn though the Maya were, defeat and subjugation were ultimately their fate.

The "culture of conquest" which developed from Spain's imperial ventures in Guatemala had a profound impact on both the land and the people, and cast a long and bitter shadow. Through the policy of *congregación* or *reducción*, meaning simply "congregation" or "reduction," thousands of Indian families were forced to move from their old homes in the mountains to new towns and villages built around churches in open valley floors. By altering the native pattern of settlement from one of dispersion to one of nucleation, congregations served the triple function of promoting more effective civil administration, facilitating the conversion of the Indians to Christianity and creating centralized pools of labor which the Spaniards ruthlessly and relentlessly exploited. The conqueror and chronicler Bernal Díaz del Castillo, writing in the mid-16th century, summed up Spanish aims and intentions quite succinctly when he declared that "we came here to serve God and the King, and also to get rich."

Because Spanish conquerors and colonists were more entrepreneurially than feudally inclined, control of labor was initially of greater importance than control of land. It was not until the exploitation of Indian labor proved to be an unreliable source of wealth that materially-

minded Spaniards turned to the land as an alternative means of support and enrichment. Spanish acquisition of land coincided closely with a period of economic depression in Central America which lasted for much of the 17th century. The principal factor behind the 17th-century depression and the taking up of land on the part of Spaniards was the depletion of the native labor force which — overworked, undernourished and constantly stricken by disease — had declined drastically in size since the early 16th century. By the end of the colonial period, the native population had recovered somewhat from the biological and cultural impact of conquest by retreating into a "culture of refuge" whereby, especially in many parts of the western highlands with limited economic or entrepreneurial potential, and consequently of no great attraction to the Spaniards, the Indians had succeeded in holding on to their ancestral lands and had kept alive their languages, customs and mores. Maya blood had been spilled and wrung, but it still ran in the veins of successive generations who survived and retained the collective memory of their forefathers.

Post-colonial period

On Sept. 15, 1821, Guatemala declared its political independence from Spain. Following abortive liberal efforts, between 1824 and 1839, to create a Union of Central America, Guatemala was governed until 1870 by a series of conservative administrations which, particularly when headed by Jose Rafael Carrera, essentially promoted the continuation of a way of life similar to the one led under Spanish domination. A Creole elite had simply replaced a Spanish peninsular elite at the top of society. Names and faces changed, but not the fabric of Guatemalan life. Affairs of state were conducted in

the new republic without unduly disturbing the "culture of refuge" the Indians had long since fashioned for themselves in remote rural areas some distance from the settlements where Creole and Ladino officials resided. Only with the coming to power of the liberal administrations of Justo Rufino Barrios in 1871 did the then predominantly communal, self-sufficient existence of scores of native communities throughout the western highlands begin to be affected by the decisions made and directions taken by the republican government.

Unlike their conservative counterparts, the liberals aimed at assimilating introspective Indian communities into a modern, outward-looking, nationalistic Ladino culture. Under Rufino Barrios, one of the principal components of the liberal drive towards modernization was a land reform program designed to abolish the collective system of Indian landholding in Guatemala by sub-dividing ownership of communal land among township inhabitants. Numerous measures to encourage Indians to secure individual titles to their land met with little success. As a result, communal holdings were often classified by government authorities as "unclaimed land" and fell into the hands of Creoles and Ladinos much more familiar with the legal aspects of landholding legislation than their non-literate and ill-informed Indian countrymen.

To the Indians, land was like air and sunlight, a God-given resource to which no one could claim exclusive proprietary rights. The notion of land as a commodity, as something that could be bought and sold, as symbols on a piece of paper signifying personal ownership, were to them completely incomprehensible. The fate of the communal lands was sealed in 1877 with the ending of *censo enfiteutico*, a system dating back to colonial times whereby rent for the use of land was exacted from Indian communities as corporate units. Legislation was also passed requiring individuals to demonstrate private ownership of land by possessing formal titles. Old community titles were simply no longer legally recognised. Although legislation governing landholding was radically altered, the Indian communities directly affected by the changes were usually unaware of them. By 1884, native communities throughout Guatemala tragically lost possession of thousands of acres of farmland to ambitious Creoles and Ladinos capitalizing on Indian ignorance of the land tenure situation.

Contemporaneous with these developments was a substantial foreign investment, particularly from German business interests, in Guatemalan coffee production. The environmental suitability of the Pacific piedmont of the country for large-scale coffee cultivation, together with the liberal disposition towards *laissez-faire* enterprise, resulted in the emergence of coffee as Guatemala's major export crop, a dominance it has maintained in the national economy from the time of Rufino Barrios up to the present day. Organized on an efficient plantation basis,



Chuj Indian boys from San Mateo Ixtatán: Last June, 36 people were massacred in their village

coffee requires an intensive labor input only during its brief harvest period. It was the drafting of a seasonal workforce from among the native communities of the western highlands to labor on coffee plantations on the Pacific piedmont that reshaped the pattern of Indian life in Guatemala and unleashed on the country the full force of capitalist development.

The methods employed to procure an adequate flow of migrant labor during the coffee harvest have varied over the years. Outright coercion in the form of a draft known as the *mandamiento* gave way to legalized debt peonage, which in turn was replaced, in 1934, by the implementation of a vagrancy law requiring individuals holding less than a stipulated amount of land to work part of each year as wage laborers for others. Anyone farming less than 6.9 acres was required to work 100 days; anyone farming less than 2.8 acres was required to work 150 days. Although forced labor in Guatemala is generally regarded as having ended with the social reforms stemming from the "revolution" which ousted the strong man Jorge Ubico in 1944, irregularities in hiring manpower for the coffee harvest have persisted. But the necessity of indenturing labor, by whatever means, has diminished since the 1940s simply because explosive population growth and the need to earn more money to feed more mouths ensure a "free" and plentiful workforce, particularly from among the Indian population, many of whom live on tiny plots of land which cannot provide year-round employment and subsistence.

Structural imbalances such as unequal land distribution are primarily responsible for the perpetuation of seasonal migration and the social disruption and economic exploitation that inevitably accompany it. In Guatemala, as throughout Latin America, the fundamental characteristic of landholding is the concentration of sizeable amounts of cultivable land in the hands of a wealthy and powerful Creole/Ladino minority, while an impoverished but dignified peasant/Indian majority subsists on a tiny percentage of the total national farmland. Official statistics in two agricultural censuses, the first conducted in 1950 and the second in 1964, reveal the essential reality of land ownership in Guatemala, namely: A small percentage of the total farmland (14.3 per cent in 1950 and 18.6 per cent in 1964) is shared between a large percentage of farm units (88.4 per cent in 1950 and 87 per cent in 1964), while a large percentage of the total farmland (72.2 per cent in 1950 and 62.6 per cent in 1964) is shared by a small percentage of farm operators (2.1 per cent in 1950 and 2.9 per cent in 1964).

Other standard socioeconomic indicators reflecting the geography of inequality in Guatemala include the following: Five per cent of the population enjoys 35 per cent of the national income, while the majority, some 70 per cent, receives average annual incomes of under \$200; 72 per cent of the population is either unemployed or underemployed; 75



Quiché Indian vendor, Chichicastengo: Tourists are staying away

per cent of all Guatemalan children under 5 years of age suffer from some form of malnutrition; life expectancy at birth is 49 years; and infant mortality is among the highest in Latin America, 9 deaths per hundred live births, with half of all deaths claiming the lives of children under 4 years of age.

The only serious attempts to redress such socioeconomic inequalities occurred between 1951 and 1954, during the short-lived government of democratically elected Jacobo Arbenz, but a CIA-orchestrated coup soon crushed all hopes of basic and widespread reforms. Since the scandalous overthrow of Arbenz, Guatemala has been governed by a series of authoritarian regimes controlled and dominated by high-ranking members of the national armed forces, whose primary goal is to safeguard the privileged socioeconomic position of an established elite.

Twenty years of military government, from Castillo Armas (1954-1957) to Kjell Laugerud (1974-1978), effectively succeeded in quelling all internal opposition to change with few major crises. The question must then be asked, what lies behind the appalling escalation of violence in Guatemala since 1978? Why have events there suddenly become — judging by increased media coverage — of more pressing humanitarian concern?

Contemporary scene

An answer to this question necessitates a return to the events of 1978 and 1979 and a review not only of what took place in Guatemala then, but also an assessment of the political situation in other parts of Central America, particularly in Nicaragua and El Salvador. In Nicaragua, the summer of 1978 marked the beginning of the final Sandinista drive to overthrow the corrupt Somoza regime, a drive which resulted, in July,

1979, in the fall of Somoza and his henchmen and in the emergence of a new social order.

The collapse of the Somoza dynasty in Nicaragua, hitherto seemingly one of the most invincible and enduring of Latin American dictatorships, sent shock waves throughout the Central American region. Reaction in El Salvador took the form, in October, 1979, of a coup against the conservative Romero regime by more enlightened, liberal elements of the armed forces. Despite the rhetoric of the civilian-military *junta*, it was a sad case of too little, too late. The purging of reform-minded individuals soon left the *junta* a bastion of right-wing extremism, and the generals ordered their troops into an undeclared civil war, the atrocities of which grow more barbaric by the day.

THE ARMED forces of Guatemala, having supervised the fraudulent election of the hard-line General Romeo Lucas García to the presidency in 1978 and having watched the ineffectiveness of El Salvador's flirtation with reform in 1979, reacted to the demise of Somoza by intensifying an already high level of repression in their country. In what can only be considered homicidal acts of self-preservation, the military government of Lucas García, over the past three years, has protected the interests of the elite which spawned it, and which it continues to represent, by unleashing on the civilian population of Guatemala a fearful campaign of terror and violence.

At first there seems to be little pattern or sense to the repression and slaughter which daily affect the lives of hundreds of Guatemalans. On closer inspection, however, what initially appear to be arbitrary, random and unconnected attacks become less of a riddle and assume

more coherent, intelligible form. The grotesque reality is that anyone holding views contrary to the extreme right-wing ideology of the oligarchy is considered "subversive," is branded a "communist" (a scare word in Guatemala) and is therefore a "danger" which must be eliminated. All opposition to the government is considered thus, and so such motley assortments as lawyers, doctors, trade unionists, students, priests, journalists, teachers, university professors, factory workers, farm laborers, indeed all persons questioning the strict government line and who are working, in whatever way, to create a more egalitarian society, are likely to constitute a target.

Systematic elimination of such people, when reported in the Guatemalan press, is usually ascribed either to *desconocidos*, that is "unknown persons," or to fanatical ultra-right death squads

with such chilling names as the *Mano Blanca* (the White Hand), *Ojo por Ojo* (Eye for an Eye) and the *Ejército Secreto Anticomunista* (the Secret Anti-communist Army). These groups are regarded as a distasteful necessity for maintaining the *status quo* and operate, despite rejoinders to the contrary, with the tacit approval of the government. Indeed, the death squads now appear to be directly in the government's employ, and in all probability are actually members of the national army or police force simply working out of uniform.

Terror and violence are therefore, in Guatemala today, tactics sanctioned by the state to crush all forms of opposition, regardless of where or from whom it is perceived to emanate. The effect is tragic. Some of those not killed outright are scared into an eerie, Kafkaesque life of *auto-censura*, a condition of "self-censorship" in which "normal" human existence is impossible. Always one must be on the lookout for *orejas*, hired informers who will report back to government departments all that they hear and observe of the people they are paid to follow or eavesdrop upon.

Still others — and this is particularly true of the Indian population, long written off as a hopelessly apathetic group — are being politicized by what they see happening around them, and cast their lot (physically and/or morally) with radical guerrilla organizations such as the *Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres* (The Guerrilla Army of the Poor) and the *Organización del Pueblo Armado* (The Revolutionary Army of People in Arms) dedicated to the overthrow of the oligarchy by means of revolutionary armed struggle. The increasing ability of the EGP and ORPA to engage the national armed forces in open conflict throughout Guatemala suggests a broadening of the guerrillas' popular base and heralds the prospect of much more bloodshed to come.

Vignettes of violence

In order to give a more precise picture of the agony and turmoil of the sad predicament of the Guatemalan people, a number of events which occurred over the past summer are

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summarized here. In most cases the circumstances are sketched from items that appeared in the national press, worded with necessarily extreme caution by journalists who file reports to newspapers such as *El Imparcial*, the *Prensa Libre*, and *El Gráfico*. Most of these stories were not carried by the international press. Their horror is unsurpassed only by the realization that, because newspaper editors and journalists are themselves victims of *auto-censura*, for every incident given notice there are countless more unreported: unacknowledged, anonymous death may be the worst death of all.

In a June edition of the daily *El Imparcial*, the following incident was reported:

Country Teacher Killed in Front of 40 School Children

A rural primary school teacher was shot to death by unknown persons in the village of Sanjón, in the Department of San Marcos, in full view of 40 of his pupils, according to local authorities.

The victim was identified as 37-year-old Adolfo Ismael Recinos Ramos, who was shot a number of times in various parts of the body, dying instantly at the scene of the attack.

Recinos Ramos had, moments before, left the small country schoolhouse of Sanjón and was walking to the bus which would have taken him to his home in nearby Malecatán.

With him walked some 40 of his pupils who were accompanying him to the bus stop. Suddenly two unknown men blocked his way and opened fire.

The body of the murdered school teacher was taken to the morgue of San Marcos national hospital at 8:30 p.m. yesterday, three hours after the shooting.

Teachers, whose very job it is to shape and form for their students an impression of the world around them, are prime targets of repression. The headline in *El Gráfico* on June 4 read: "Five Teachers Gunned Down: One in San Lucas, Three in Nueva Concepción, and One More in the Capital." Particularly hard hit is the University of San Carlos, one of the oldest centres of learning in the Americas, now a skeleton of its former vibrant self, since scores of professors and students there have been brutally murdered, or intimidated into silence, or have taken to the hills to join the guerrillas. On June 25, celebrated as Teachers Day, leaflet bombs which exploded in a number of cities declared the founding of the *Frente Revolucionario de Maestros*, the Revolutionary Teachers Front.

Not all teachers targeted for death are dispatched quickly. Some mysteriously "disappear" or are kidnapped, only to show up dead a week, a month, a year later. From the June 3 edition of *El Gráfico*:

Kidnapped Teacher Found Dead

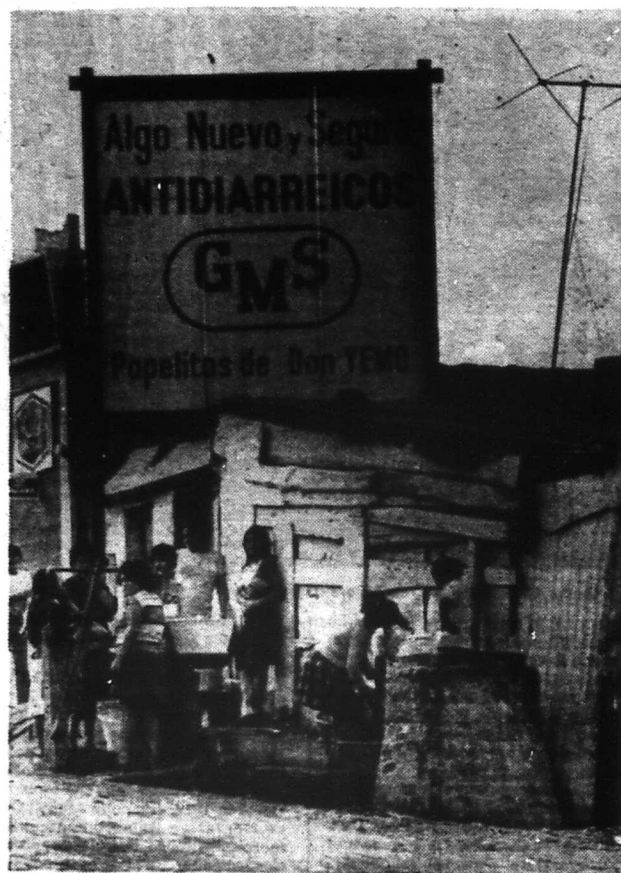
The schoolteacher Bertha Alicia Morán González, 23 years of age, who was kidnapped on Saturday, May 23, was found dead in the early hours of this morning at 14th Avenue and 8th Street in Zone 6 of Guatemala City.

Beside the teacher's body there was also the corpse of a 40-year-old man, as yet unidentified. The family of the deceased teacher visited the morgue of San Vicente hospital where they identified her body.

The teacher had been abducted on May 23 after leaving her home to attend a birthday party to be held in her honor at a neighbor's house.

Her body was found with the same clothes she had on at the time of her abduction.

In this case, no evidence of rape or torture is announced, but sexual assault and disfigurement often



Communal well in Guatemala City 'Shanty Town'

await the victim between disappearance and death. The following account, from the *Prensa Libre*, May 25, records the murder of journalist Fulvio Alirio Mejía Milián, who worked for the newspaper *La Nación*. Journalism, like teaching, can easily be interpreted as "subversive" and is therefore an occupation constantly under censure of death. Alirio Mejía's is again but one example of many:

Journalist Was Disfigured Bodies of Other Persons Also Found Butchered

The body of the journalist Fulvio Alirio Mejía Milián, which mysteriously appeared in Cuilapa, Santa Rosa, along with the bodies of various others, showed signs of cruel torture, attributed primarily to blows from a machete [a long knife used in Guatemala for agricultural labor].

His face was a mass of deep wounds, apparently perpetrated to produce chronic disfigurement and thus to prevent recognition of his body. He was also stripped of his clothes, but his wife, Esmeralda Chavarria de Mejía, was eventually able to identify him.

He and the people found with him were given the same treatment as persons now turning up dead all over the Guatemalan highlands. Badly-beaten and amputated bodies have appeared in many localities. All of them indicated signs of torture and the ominous mark of strangulation.

The naked or semi-clad bodies of the

five people found with the corpse of Alirio Mejía included a nine-year-old boy and other juveniles, all of whom were brutally disfigured. The murder of all six victims was an abominable act, especially the butchering of the nine-year-old boy who, in addition to being knifed in the face, also had his tongue cut out. When newsmen arrived [in Cuilapa] seeking information, the grave diggers had begun to bury the five juvenile bodies. Because no family members were there to identify them, they were laid to rest in an anonymous common grave. Several locals offered prayers to the Almighty for the eternal rest of their souls.

Alirio Mejía at least "reappeared" and, despite the mutilated condition of his corpse, was identified by his wife. The pain of relatives and friends of other *desaparecidos*, ("disappeared ones"), who do not reappear is prolonged indefinitely. Such is the case of the journalist Rodrigo Ramírez Morales who, according to a report in *El Gráfico*, dated July 16, had still not "reappeared" following his abduction, one month earlier, by a group of armed men while driving his car one day in the company of his wife. She, like many others, placed a notice in the newspapers beseeching his captors to spare his life and to allow him to return home (in this instance to five small children). The pleas of distraught next-of-kin, which also appear with photos of the

desaparecidos in the personal columns, appropriately not too far from notices of bereavement, make harrowing reading. The following is no exception:

DISAPPEARED: The family of Licenciado Oswaldo René Cifuentes de León once again appeals, in the name of GOD, to those who have him in their power to release him. Already his absence has brought much pain and suffering to his home, especially to his mother Marta de Cifuentes and to his wife Elvia de Cifuentes, who are in great distress at not knowing his whereabouts, as is also his infant son who cries to have his father back with him. The family begs those who hold him to respect his person and to let him return home, for he is a man dedicated to his family, to his profession and has never been involved in any kind of political activity. At the same time his family begs the Supreme Creator that those responsible for his captivity never have to suffer what they are going through now, but that He forgives them and makes them see the error of their ways. Any information will be gratefully appreciated. God will pay you back.

Into such cases few official enquiries are made. Seldom is anyone brought to trial. And this is hardly surprising, for while doubtless there is a criminal element exploiting the unstable political situation to conduct personal vendettas, the fact remains that most of the violence currently engulfing Guatemala is engineered by the government itself through its control of the nation's security forces; and so when the authorities deem necessary the removal of anyone posing a threat to them, they have no intention of bringing to justice the goons who simply execute, with gory efficiency, government orders. To the state, annihilation of any perceived opposition is justice.

This is not to suggest that there are no acts of violence committed on the part of leftist guerrillas. Obviously there are. But whereas the left strikes swiftly [at army convoys, at "off-duty" policemen, at insufficiently guarded businessmen, plantation owners and other government sympathizers], the work of the right-wing death squads is characteristically slow, designed, so it seems, to inflict maximum physical suffering on the victim and maximum psychological anguish, as in the case of *desaparecidos*, on the next of kin.

At times, however, the rapidity and ruthlessness of the armed forces, particularly the army and the police, are nothing short of draconian. The lethal swiftness with which they can move to action was apparent on the 9th and 10th of July when, on two separate occasions, guerrilla "safehouses" in different neighborhoods of Guatemala City were located, surrounded and blown apart, resulting in over 30 deaths. To the guerrilla group involved, ORPA, this was a devastating blow, one in which they lost not only dedicated followers but also ammunition, weapons and assorted supplies. Concomitantly, it was a much needed lift to government morale.

Perhaps the most horrific aspect of this episode was that when the bodies of the guerrillas, including eight women, were displayed in La Verbena morgue, a number of them — judging, said *El Gráfico* of July 12, from the reaction of people looking for missing relatives — were definitely recognised and could have been identified. But because people feared that reprisals would accompany any known association with the dead guerrillas, no one

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spoke up. And so the corpses were interred, marked XX, in yet another anonymous common grave.

The heavy-handedness manifested in this operation (artillery and tanks were brought in) was, in a way, unusual, for it occurred in well-to-do neighborhoods of Guatemala City, Colonia El Carmen and Vista Hermosa. The countryside and not the capital city is more commonly the location of the heaviest fighting, particularly the departments of the Indian northwest, especially in Huehuetenango and El Quiché. So great is the strife in these two departments — remote, mountainous, the ideal physical environment for guerrilla activity — that the government is careful not to allow news of all that happens there to reach the national press. But information filters to Guatemala City, is spread by word of mouth around the University of San Carlos and gains circulation in this fashion. By such means it is possible to make more sense of certain items appearing in the newspapers.

Thus can the events of early June in the town of San Mateo Ixtatán, like pieces in a fatal jigsaw, be fitted together. On June 4, the front page of *El Gráfico* showed two young Indian boys in the hospital at San Mateo. The caption beneath their photos read:

Juan Domingo Martin is one of four young survivors of the actions of a heavily armed group of men who invaded the homes of the townspeople of San Mateo Ixtatán, murdering 36 men, women and children. The young boy does not speak Spanish and has no serious injuries, but he is left an orphan, his mother and father having been killed. The other young Indian boy in the photo, named Andres Gomez Diego, gravely wounded, tries to tell, in broken Spanish, some of his impressions of what took place.

Here the "official" story fizzles out. The editor of *El Gráfico* possibly considered it unwise to print the information he received, or perhaps was told not to print it. Reports circulating in Guatemala City presented the following scenario. The guerrillas, as they do commonly in the northwest, took over San Mateo briefly at dusk and, speaking to the population in its native tongue, Chuj, held a propaganda meeting at which they explained their aims and purposes, attempting to raise the consciousness of the people (*conscientización*) and win their sympathy and support. After the speechmaking was over, the guerrillas withdrew to the safety of the hills and the night.

Shortly after midnight, the army, presumably tipped off as to the approximate whereabouts of the guerrillas, arrived and began what proved to be a fruitless search. Frustrated at not finding their prey, the soldiers turned on the townspeople themselves, but not before they had been ordered by their commanding officer to take off their uniforms and put on civilian clothes.

Massacres such as this one are tragically on the increase and now involve hundreds of deaths, as at San Miguel Acatán in Huehuetenango and in the Ixil area of northern Quiché. The government seeks to terrorise the local population, the majority of them Indian, into having no contact whatever with guerrilla organizations, organizations which the Lucas Garcia administration mythically insists are staffed, supplied and manipulated by Cuba, Nicaragua and the Soviet Union.

In its desire to believe (and have the rest of the world, particularly the

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United States, believe also) that it is the victim of an international communist conspiracy, the government deliberately overlooks the fact that the guerrillas speak to the Indians in their own Mayan languages, strange tongues unlikely to have been learned anywhere else but in Guatemala. Certainly some arms and personnel may trickle to the Indians from the outside, but nothing to the extent of military hardware and advice shipped to the Guatemalan government from the United States, Israel or Argentina. The principal cause of the fighting (over 3,000

new jobs). Along the widened Pan-American Highway, etched into the walls of volcanic ash rising above the newly paved surface, slogans declare: *In public works like this one the government of General Lucas uses your taxes.* Ironically, but not surprisingly, the tourists expected to make use of the improved transportation system in fact grow fewer and fewer by the week. An unusually frank editorial in *El Gráfico* one day this summer addressed itself to political violence, foreign image and the collapse of the formerly booming Guatemalan tourist industry:

Guatemala, A Tourist Paradise — But Without Tourists

The hotel business in this country, upon which thousands of Guatemalan families are financially dependent, is in a state of crisis, a crisis brought about by the sensible decline of foreign tourism, principally from North America and Europe. This decline affects not only hoteliers but also many other related activities, such as tours organized by travel agencies and the handicraft industry, which are directly linked to the inflow of visitors.

A recent convention of hoteliers in Quetzaltenango had as its main focus of attention the hard times that have fallen upon hoteliers not just in the capital but throughout the country because of the drastic decrease in tourism which has already forced the closure of one important hotel, the Cortijo de las Flores in Sacatepequez, and threatens the closure of others. All of Guatemala is an open book of Latin American history. The richness of its pre-Columbian and colonial heritage is well recognized, set in landscapes of dreamlike beauty and in one of the most agreeable climates in the world... But all this means nothing in the face of the violence which rules our country today, and this image projected abroad is the chief factor behind the decline in tourism, a business which thrived here not long ago.

Conservative estimates place the drop in foreign visitors over the past year at 20 per cent. But we believe this figure to be an optimistic one. We must confront the reality of our situation and not hide our heads in the sand.

What is said of Guatemala in other countries exerts a powerful influence over the well-being of tourism. A climate of violence reigns in our country today, a violence we see escalating each day in the number of kidnappings, murders and attempts on human life. A recent international cable sent out by Associated Press (AP) mentions Guatemala, together with El Salvador, as being among parts of the planet currently in a state of war. Violence is something that has now spilled beyond our territorial limits to the notice of the outside world, and this is something we cannot hide. The decline of tourism is painful, particularly because its vibrancy over the past few years greatly assisted our economy and helped us withstand the effects of the collapse of coffee on the international market. Up until a relatively short time ago, Guatemala showed to the rest of mankind a friendly, cheerful face. Today we are a sad and preoccupied people. And the splendor of our landscapes, the kindness of our weather, the richness of our culture can do nothing to change that expression.

Places as much as people are repositories of memory. The temples of Tikal under a full July moon. Walking the streets of Antigua at dusk. After rain, watching the sky clear behind Volcán Agua, beauty only an eye's glance away. The smell of burning *pom*, the sacred incense, at Chichicastenango. Smiles and grins on market day. The cold turquoise waters of the Rio Azul. Rockets launched on saints' days into a blue sea of heaven. The blaze of bougainvillea on an old church wall. Mist in a cornfield at dawn. The *xocomil* wind blowing fragrant and strong over the stirring dark surface of lake Atitlán. A blood-soaked sun going down behind the Cuchumatanes mountains. Memories fade. An agony abides. □

Donald McAlpine has travelled extensively throughout Latin America over the past seven years, and teaches and writes about his experiences there.



deaths this year alone) is neither imported nor inspired from abroad. Its roots lie deep in the institutional structures which perpetuate appalling inequities between the few who have everything and the many who have nothing.

Meanwhile, in an attempt to improve its image at home and overseas, the Guatemalan government has launched a massive propaganda campaign in which it portrays itself to be pushing ahead on all social fronts (health, education, land reform, housing, installation of water and electricity and the creation of



Indian boy at Santiago Atitlán: Terror is a way of life