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GUATEMALA: DEATH SQUADS AND DISAPPEARANCES

by Robert Harris

Froilan Rendon Pineda of San Vicente Pacaya, in Guatemala's Escuintla Department was kidnapped in November 1974. He escaped when the kidnapper's car crashed. The press noted casually that Patrolman Paiz Ovando of the National Police, *one of the kidnappers*, was killed in the crash.

On 5 July this year detectives of the Guatemalan National Police informed Mrs Felisa de Coloch of the arrest of her husband Gregorio Coloch Lajuj on the farm "El Paraiso" near San Jose Pinula. But in the days following the police authorities denied categorically having detained Gregorio Coloch. Gregorio Coloch is one of thousands of Guatemalans who have simply "disappeared".

Guatemala is probably the only country with a full time volunteer organization concerned specifically with murder victims, and with caring for their destitute families. Guatemala's *Comité de familiares de personas desaparecidas* (Committee of Relatives of Disappeared Persons) has chronicled 15,325 "disappearance" cases between 1970 and summer 1975. They claim government security forces were in some way involved in 75% of the cases. Most are presumed dead.

The "disappeared" in Guatemala are not comparable to "missing persons" in other countries. Here "disappearance" in most cases refers to extra-legal detentions, often followed by torture and mutilation, and almost always leading to death. It is differentiated from kidnapping in the conventional sense in that it occurs with the compliance or active support of governmental authorities, and there is no motive in ransom. The perpetrators are generally organized in well-armed, disciplined groups. These para-military or para-police groups have been repeatedly shown to incorporate both civilians and active military personnel.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States in October 1974 approved a resolution on Guatemala concerning the disappearance of over 300 individuals, resolving to "presume that those persons have disappeared as a consequence of arbitrary acts... and that agents of the Government of Guatemala or persons who had counted with the protection or tolerance of these agents had not been unaware of such acts".

The beginning of the institutionalization of mass murder as a political sanction is generally dated to 6 March 1966 when 28 trade unionists and members of the Guatemalan Communist Party (PTG) were arrested while attending a clandestine meeting. Four months later two ex-policemen explained their "disappearance" by reporting that they had been tortured and murdered and their bodies dropped from an Army transport plane into the sea.

From 1966 to 1968 a massive offensive incorporating the police, the military and rightwing civilians was mounted against the guerrilla forces active in the eastern departments of Izabal, Zacapa and Alta Verapaz. In December 1966 legislation was approved commissioning large landowners and their administrators as officers in the national police, with full police powers. Purely military operations using napalm, helicopter gunships and other advanced weaponry were supplemented by this expansion of the rural police force and the formation of para-military forces, incorporating agents of the police and civilians with close ties to the local areas. A climate of terror was created in which para-military groups in conjunction with military and police forces acted without restriction against individuals suspected of sympathies with the guerrillas. An estimated 6,000 to 8,000 lives were lost in the two-year program of "pacification" in eastern Guatemala.

Justification for the violence and terror that began in this period and which continues unchecked to date has been given publicly by two public figures closely linked to the anti-guerrilla offensive. Colonel John Webber, the United States military attaché at the time, was said by *Time* magazine (26 January 1968) to have acknowledged that "it was his idea and at his instigation that the technique of counter-terror had been implemented by the Guatemalan Army in the Izabal areas". The same article quoted Colonel Webber concerning the justification for terror tactics on the part of the government: "That's the way the country is. The Communists are using everything they have, including terror. And it must be met".

Mario Sandoval Alarcon, one of the founders of the political party formed around the leaders of the 1954 coup *Movimiento de Liberación Nacional* - MLN (the Movement for National Liberation), and now its director general and Vice-President of the Republic, commented on the same theme: "... between January and March 1967 the guerrillas have been almost completely eliminated... The terrorism of the guerrillas... has forced the government to adopt a plan of complete illegality, but this has brought results" (Norman Gall, "Guatemalan Slaughter", *New York Review of Books*, May 1971).



The para-military groups that emerged in 1966 did not limit themselves to combatting violent revolutionaries. In June 1966 the first of many leaflets announced the formation of "*MANO Blanca*" - the "white hand" - and its mission to purge Guatemala of "communists" and "communist sympathizers". Within a short time other similar groups were formed. By early 1967 the victims of these groups were numerous, and included students, teachers, journalists and members of the political opposition, as well as countless nameless peasants.

From mid-1966 the MLN, the principal spokesman for the Guatemalan political right, supported the organization of vigilante groups to fight "subversion". A manifesto published by the MLN on 27 September 1966 noted that "the government should not consider it strange that citizens organize to take justice into their own hands..."; and on 16 May 1968, that "diverse sectors of the citizenry, reacting justifiably to the growing leftist offensive, have spontaneously organized themselves, have adopted a posture of self-defence, and have begun to respond to the enemy with the same arms and the same tactics."

As Guatemalan diplomats in November 1975 sought international recognition of Guatemala's claims to sovereignty over the Central American British colony of Belize, Vice-President Mario Sandoval Alarcon appears to have obliquely referred to these self-same vigilante groups by telling the international press that a "4,000 man armed force controlled by the MLN was "ready to take up arms against the English". Mario Sandoval Alarcon is popularly known to Guatemalans as one of the founders of *MANO Blanca*.

While the guerrilla movements have been largely eliminated in Guatemala, the actions of rightwing death squads continue unchecked. Since 1966 tens of thousands of Guatemalans have "disappeared" and been murdered by paramilitary groups. In July this year, the latest public threats from death squad organizations were received by leaders and members of trade unions and cooperatives. A mimeographed sheet signed by *MANO* warned individuals to abandon their "pro-communist attitudes... if you wish to remain alive and well". Stressing that "no cost is too high to liberate Guatemala from communism it continues: "As evidence we speak the truth: thirty thousand peasant graves bear witness."

In almost every case death squads have acted with total immunity to prosecution. However there has been at least one exception. Officers Lauro Alvarado y Alvarado and Marco Tulio Osorio of the National Police, partners in a radio patrol car, shot student Luis Felipe Martinez in September 1972 and left him for dead. They also murdered a witness to the shooting, Maria Etelvina Flores Herrera. But Martinez survived, and accused the officers of murder; both were detained.

However, faced with a possible death sentence, Officer Alvarado began to recount a number of experiences similar to the shooting of Martinez and Maria Flores from his twenty years of police service. He began by smuggling a declaration out of prison in which he told of arresting on "superior orders" a number of well known leftwing personalities who subsequently "disappeared" or were found dead. He told of his 29 November 1970 arrest of Humberto Gonzalez Juarez, a leftwing proprietor of a radio station. Gonzalez had been a minor functionary in the government of President Jacobo Arbenz which was overthrown in 1954 by an army of mercenaries and exiles organized and directed by the United States Central Intelligence Agency. He said that in 1971 he had detained the intellectual Santos Landa Castaneda for "subversive activities". Officer Alvarado added that he had turned both prisoners over to the Guatemalan Secret Police. Santos Landa Castaneda was never seen again. The tortured body of Humberto Gonzalez Juarez was eventually found in a roadside ditch.

Although Alvarado was put in solitary confinement after the press published his initial statements, he made a tape recording detailing the arrests of a number of other members of the political opposition who mysteriously "disappeared". On the tape he said he was prepared to name many other police officers directly involved in these actions. Both he and his partner were subsequently condemned to death by firing squad.

On 15 April leaders of opposition parties cabled President Kjell Laugerud calling for a stay of execution until the allegations were fully investigated. The Minister of the Interior replied that an investigation would be based on the tape recording. On 16 April, Officers Alvarado and Marco Tulio Osorio were executed by firing squad in the cemetery of the Pavón prison farm near Guatemala City. The investigation into the death squads apparently died with them.

"Disappearance" as a prelude to murder by death squads also occurs to a lesser extent in Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador. Brazil and Argentina both suffer from extensive activity of highly organized death squads, although the Brazilian case is one in which these groups are closely integrated into a technically highly sophisticated police apparatus. But while Brazilian death squads might be seen to be subsidiary forces integrated into the conventional political police apparatus, in Guatemala the situation is the reverse: the death squads are a fundamental basis of political sanctions and control and are supported by the conventional forces.

The common factor in death squad operations is the use of terror to control dissent. Death squads murder individuals but threaten entire populations. Murder, torture, mutilation and the concomitant lurid publicity - especially in the

Guatemalan press - multiply the effect of individual actions to create a society-wide climate of terror.

Death squads aim at paralyzing real or potential opposition and dissent both through the elimination of leaders and the generalized threat of "disappearance", torture and violent death. In Guatemala the threat is continually restated by the regular reappearance of the bodies of the disappeared in ravines and empty lots in urban areas, along country roads, and in the clandestine cemeteries periodically unearthed in the countryside.

The Guatemalan *Comité de familiares de personas desaparecidas* (Committee of Relatives of Disappeared Persons) has recently initiated an international campaign against the terror and violence plaguing Guatemala. The group is circulating a list of 253 Guatemalans who vanished without a trace in recent years; they ask the world to appeal to Guatemala's authorities on their behalf. They declare that "kidnapping, torture and murder have become the daily bread of the people... The disappeared number in thousands, and there are countless hidden cemeteries... Alone the Guatemalan people cannot restrain this violence. The world is our hope."