

2. GUATEMALA: REPORTS OF ATROCITIES MARK ARMY GAINS

The Guatemalan military is making slow progress against insurgent forces amid widespread allegations of atrocities by the troops. Much of the government's progress can be credited to President Rios Montt's arming of the highland Indians, which could boomerang should they turn against the government in the future. The insurgents, faced with growing opposition from traditionally supportive or at least neutral Indian villages, have begun killing those perceived as not supporting their cause.

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The "rifles and beans" policy initiated in July by Rios Montt is characterized by alternating the use of carrots--such as the offer of amnesty for guerrillas--and sticks--the State of Siege, a heavy military offensive, and the organization of the Indians into Civil Defense Forces (CDFs).

Hoping to befriend the Indians, Rios has ordered the Army to distribute food to the "friendly" populace following operations. Similarly, a new code of conduct admonishes the largely illiterate soldiers not to steal "even a pin" from the civilian population. The CDF patrols reportedly have acquitted themselves well against insurgent forces, considering the fact that members are impressed into service and only a minority have firearms. In response, the guerrillas have massacred CDF members, their families, and others in villages believed to support the government.

The government has improved its control over rural areas through a strategic village program in which the rural populace is ordered to move to villages where the army has outposts. A scorched earth policy is then applied in the surrounding areas. These tactics have been accompanied by widespread allegations that government troops are regularly guilty of massacres, rape, and mayhem. US Embassy investigations have found that some of these reports cannot be verified, that some of the atrocities reported are attributable to the guerrillas, and that still others cannot be attributed with accuracy to either side. The Embassy does not as yet believe that there is sufficient evidence to link government troops to any of the reported massacres.

Recent government successes have hurt two of the four insurgent groups. Nonetheless, the Cuban-trained Guerrilla Army of the Poor, the largest guerrilla organization, continues to harass the army regularly in much of the highland Departments (provinces) of Huehuetenango and El Quiche. This heavy fighting along the Mexican border in Huehuetenango Department has caused several thousand Guatemalans to seek safety in refugee camps in Mexico. The fighting has generated a number of reports of cross-border fire by Guatemalan troops and at least one report of an incursion into Mexican territory.

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