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BUREAU OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH - ANALYSIS - NOVEMBER 21, 1983

1. GUATEMALA: DEATH SQUADS RESUME ACTIVITY

The personal security situation in Guatemala is slowly but steadily deteriorating. Although former president Rios Montt never was able to gain full control of the military, his efforts to end human rights abuses by the security forces were surprisingly successful. Unfortunately, Rios Montt's interest in ending unauthorized violence is not shared by the current chief of state, General Mejia, and this is well known by the security forces and right-wing paramilitary groups. Only last week three USAID Guatemalan contractors were murdered, possibly as an example to the US not to meddle in human rights issues. The week before, a priest was murdered in the first such incident since the regime of Lucas Garcia.

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Last week's murder of three Guatemalan AID workers following the visit of a high-level US delegation illustrates the difficulty of attempts by foreigners to influence Guatemalan human-rights practices. The Guatemalans invariably react xenophobically to any suggestion--no matter how private and delicate--that their treatment of perceived enemies of the regime should be moderated. The progress Guatemala made in reducing arbitrary violence during Rios Montt's tenure was the result of a domestic, not a foreign, government's efforts and interest.

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The recent murder of a Catholic priest--and Mejia's public condemnation of the Church's involvement in subversive activities--bodes ill for the future. Although thirteen priests were killed while Gen. Lucas Garcia was in power, none were killed during the seventeen-month Rios Montt government. The Guatemalan Church's response will be much stronger than before, however. Its leadership is young and aggressive and received a great boost from the Pope's courageous preaching during his visit earlier this year.

Although the progress made under the Rios Montt government illustrates that the chief of state does exercise a certain degree of power, the army's ultimate ouster of Rios clearly indicates the limits of that authority. Even under Rios disappearances continued. Indeed, the Acting Apostolic Administrator--in a cryptic comment prior to leaving for Rome recently--claimed that some five hundred catechists have disappeared, which no doubt included a number under Rios.

Gen. Mejia is more concerned with staying in office than in creating controversy by exercising authority over the security forces to end human-rights abuses. It is thus likely that various members of the security forces or private death squads--probably acting largely independently--will feel few constraints about taking whatever measures they deem useful against perceived subversive threats.

Reports
 says the contractor