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Human Rights in Guatemala (S/NF/NC/OR)

Human rights violations by Guatemalan security forces have decreased substantially over the past four months, particularly in the cities. During the same period, killings of civilians by the insurgent forces have reached unprecedented levels.

The improvement in the human rights situation can be credited to the efforts of President Rios Montt, a retired army general who was asked to lead the military junta set up by the junior officers after the March 23 coup.

An evangelical Christian, Rios Montt gained a reputation for honesty in 1971 when his attacks on corruption in the Armed Forces cost him his position as Army Chief of Staff. He bolstered his reputation in 1974, when he was widely believed to have won the presidential elections, although the office was denied him by ballot fraud.

As president, Rios Montt made clear his intention to try to end politically motivated killings by government forces. He has disbanded the detective squad and the judicial police, a signal to right wing "death squads" that their activities would no longer be tolerated. On the other hand, Rios Montt is reliably reported to have secretly reserved to himself the power to authorize extra-legal actions designed to eliminate alleged subversives who escape punishment in the courts. The number of deaths which the US Embassy attributed to the security forces was cut almost in half a month after Rios Montt's accession to power. This trend continued into June when the government offered a 30-day amnesty to the insurgents.

Nevertheless, other actions have tarnished the government's progress in curbing abuses. Rios Montt eased out the other two members of the junta in early June and rules alone. He has made general references to a return to constitutional rule, but has announced no date for elections. It appears, however, that Rios Montt does plan to convene a constituent assembly some time next year.

Bringing its own forces under control is one of the most difficult tasks the government faces. The government declared war

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on the insurgents when the amnesty expired on July 1. Former military personnel have been recalled to active duty to take part in an energetic campaign against the guerrillas. This development raises the possibility that increased conflict will lead to human rights violations.

The government faces its greatest challenge in the predominantly indigenous northwestern highland departments of Huehuetenango and El Quiche. The Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) has predicted for 10 years that the government intends to exterminate the area's Indian population: the EGP believes that winning the support of the long-suffering Indian holds the key to eventual control of the government. Guerrilla violence directed against the non-Indian elite provoked a harsh reaction under former president Lucas, and large numbers of Indians, priests, lay workers, teachers, and cooperative leaders were killed in a wave of violence.

Rios Montt's most important step in support of the Indians is the decision to arm them and organize them into Civil Defense Forces (CDFs). Contrary to guerrilla expectations, the CDFs have not turned their weapons on government forces. Instead, the armed Indians have denied guerrillas easy access to villages and have killed or wounded many guerrillas. In reprisal, the insurgents have attacked CDF members and their families.

In some cases, however, the identity of the attackers is not known. One clandestine source reported that guerrilla forces wore Guatemalan Army camouflage uniforms when they massacred 150 campesinos in Alta Verapaz Department. There are other reports that the army, during raids, sometimes wears the olive drab used by the guerrillas.

Before the March 23 coup, most of the killings were thought to be the work of the military and security forces and right-wing death squads. In contrast, the US Embassy now estimates that the number of civilians killed by the left jumped from 33 in the first quarter of 1982 to 358 in the second quarter.

These murders reflect the guerrillas' concern about the sagging momentum of the insurgency. The growth in guerrilla ranks was arrested when Rios Montt came to power and curtailed government abuses. His amnesty plan also helped to reverse the trend. Moreover, the reformist attitude of the new government has undercut the legitimacy of the guerrilla movement, which is trying, by provoking military repression, to recover popular support.

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