



United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

H 4

UNCLASSIFIED

November 23, 1982

~~EYES ONLY~~
~~SECRET/SENSITIVE~~

DECAPTIONED

DEPARTMENT OF STATE
 RELEASE
 EXCISE
 DENY
IM/PS/CP/OT Date: 1/15
 DECLASSIFY
 DECLASSIFY IN PART
EO Citations _____

TO: HA - Elliott Abrams
HA - Mel Levitsky

FROM: HA - Charles Fairbanks

Ch J PA Exemptions _____
Exemptions _____
 CLASSIFY as S or C Se
 DOWNGRADE IS to S or C Se

SUBJECT: Credibility of Embassy Guatemala Human Rights Reporting

Two recent incidents underline the care we need to use in arguing before Congressional committees and the public how much we know about what is going on in Guatemala. First, we received cables from the Embassy assuring us that all the charges about Human Rights violations against the people who had fled to Choatulum were false. Then we received a cable based on eye witness testimony cancelling these earlier assertions to the extent of admitting that these people were fleeing from ill treatment by the Guatemalan Army. Second, when I briefed Congressional staffers with Otto Reich, Chuck Berk of the SFRC insisntently badgered me with the question "what is your methodology?" This is an obnoxious and phony question, because no methodology gives a cookbook solution to finding the truth. But it is a very difficult question for us to answer, given the character of Embassy Guatemala's reporting.

The vigor of our justified attack on the NGOs' shoddy use of evidence is bound to raise the question about how good our Embassy evidence is. What are the sources of Embassy conclusions on who committed human rights violations? In the course of preparing for the recent briefing, I went through most of the important cable traffic from Guatemala since March 23. The picture that appears when all the Embassy reporting is viewed together is rather different than the impression one gets from reading each cable when it comes in.

Sources of Embassy Reporting

1. Asking the Army

All of the early Embassy responses to charges of Army massacres were based primarily on asking the Army whether or not they were true. There is an obvious problem here, but it is worth thinking a little further about what the problem is. Army accounts are distorted for three reasons:

UNCLASSIFIED

~~EYES ONLY~~
~~SECRET/SENSITIVE~~

DECAPTIONED

~~EYES ONLY~~
~~SECRET/SENSITIVE~~

- 2 -

UNCLASSIFIED

A. The Rios Montt Government faces a tremendous international campaign alleging human rights violations, and obviously has, at the top level, motives to conceal such violations, whether or not they do so.

B. Perhaps more significant are the motives of middle echelon officers in the Guatemalan Army, who are faced with the ugly and difficult task of quelling a guerrilla war without adequate forces and in the absence of U.S. assistance. At the same time they know that Rios Montt is a reformer, who does not want his subordinates to be brutal. The combination of these circumstances creates an obvious motive for middle-level officers to use very tough methods in fighting the war, but not to report these methods fully to the President and his immediate circle.

C. Finally, guerrilla wars are fought by squad- and platoon-size units operating far away from their higher command and with poor communications. Noncommissioned officers and subalterns notoriously give very misleading reports about what happens to their superiors -- not only out of self-interest but because they do not have the professionalism and carefully refined judgment about what to report of higher officers *may have.*

During the first months of World War I, the British ^{Fleet} fled from its anchorage every day because the lookouts saw periscopes in the water which eventually turned out not to be there. The fact that in Guatemala the people actually fighting the war are the people who report least reliably on how it is fought, surely affects the information that reaches Army headquarters.

The notion that Army testimony about its own human rights violations is unreliable is not only my own idea, but derived from the Embassy reporting itself. Guatemala 7396 reports that the Army falsifies its military bulletins. Guatemala 7747 reports that the Army does not report many incidents which we know to have occurred from other sources. According to Guatemala 7747, when our Embassy asked the Army about the truth of certain incidents alleged by NGOs, the answer received was different from the Army press releases issued earlier for the same period of time. In other words the Army itself says different things at different times.

~~EYES ONLY~~
~~SECRET/SENSITIVE~~
UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

2. The Guatemalan Press

The Embassy has also relied heavily, before the state of siege was proclaimed, on reports of human rights violations in the Guatemalan press. Of course, since the state of siege all such press reports are drawn from army press releases. But we know from Guatemala 7775 that even for the period before the state of seige ~~was~~ many incidents reported by the Army itself (in answer to our inquiries) didnot appear in the press. This fact renders dubious the argument used by the Embassy against some Amnesty International and WOLA allegations of large scale atrocities; "it is doubtful the media would have missed it" (Guatamala 7741).

3. Video Tapes and Transcripts

In a number of cases Embassy Guatemala has supplemented Army reports and the Guatemalan press with its own viewing of confirming materials, such as video tapes shown on Guatemalan TV or transcripts of eye witness testimony. We also need to be cautious about this category of evidence. In fact, the early optimistic cables about Choatulum were partly based on TV interviews of refugees who said they were fleeing from the guerrillas (Guatemala 7825). A later cable, as we know, established that they were fleeing from the Army.

4. On-Site Inspections and Interviews with Eye Witnesses

These are the only really good methods of being sure of who is responsible for human rights violations in the Guatemalan countryside, although they are far from infallible. We have not done very many such inspections. I was directly asked by Chuck Berk (and other Administration witnesses are likely to be asked) exactly how many on-site inspections Embassy Guatemala has carried out. I don't know the answer, but suspect it might be embarrassing.

5. Conclusions

I would conclude from this that our Embassy does not really know who is responsible for the killings in rural Guatemala.

UNCLASSIFIED

~~EYES ONLY~~
~~SECRET/SENSITIVE~~

~~UNCLASSIFIED~~

- 4 -

We do know that the NGO account of this is quite unpersuasive, and I, myself believe the guerrillas are doing more atrocities than the other side. But we cannot be sure of this or argue it effectively to hostile audiences with the information we now have. It is to my mind a proof of this situation that Embassy Guatemala has said for several months that it believes the Army is responsible for major human rights violations, but has not advised reported in any cable a single instance that it believes was done by the Army. I do not think there is any misrepresentation by our Embassy, but there maybe wishful thinking; at least we could make a greater effort to have the facts we need to argue from.

I would draw two specific conclusions. First, until we can improve our evidence we need to be careful in the reliance we place on it in public statements. Second, it would be extremely useful to improve our human rights reporting from Guatemala as Jon Glassman proposed some time ago. According to Guatemala 7935, our Embassy exhausted all of its travel money (under the continuing resolution) -- \$1,600 -- on one unsuccessful fact-finding mission intended to find out about two of Father Hennessy's allegations. When the human rights situation in the countryside is the issue on which our developing relationship with Guatemala will stand or fall, such a situation is amazing.

~~EYES ONLY~~
~~SECRET/SENSITIVE~~

~~UNCLASSIFIED~~

**NATIONAL
SECURITY
ARCHIVE**

This document is from the holdings of:

The National Security Archive

Suite 701, Gelman Library, The George Washington University

2130 H Street, NW, Washington, D.C., 20037

Phone: 202/994-7000, Fax: 202/994-7005, nsarchiv@gwu.edu