



TERROR CAMPAIGN TARGETS STUDENTS

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by Michael Subasic and Mika Maniwa
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"Four of you will die."

The threat to the office of Guatemala's National Association of University Students (AEU) was no crank call.

Two weeks later, on Aug. 25, two architecture students from the University of San Carlos were shot dead in Guatemala City. Twenty-four-year-old Erick Callejas and Marlon Scott, 22, died from multiple bullet wounds. Each had been shot in the head, the "tiro de gracia" usually indicative of a political assassination by a right-wing death squad.

Callejas and Scott were not deeply involved in the student association. Student leaders at the university said the murders fit a familiar pattern of repression.

"Instead of targeting leaders, they want to discourage other people from getting involved," one said.



Police carrying away protesters outside University of San Carlos (USAC), Guatemala City, September 1985.

Numerous billboards and radio ads proclaim the new civilian government's commitment to lasting peace and praise the army's dedication to the people. But repression in Guatemala is escalating as negotiations to end 30 years of civil war continue.

feature

This is a country where teaching basic literacy to landless peasants is evidence of being a "communist subversive."

Since the inauguration of a new president last January, human rights organizations in

the country have reported over 500 disappearances and 140 political assassinations. At least three people are killed or kidnapped every day, an alarming increase over previous years.

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Earlier in the summer, 80 students including medical, engineering and law students were forced into the army against their will and sent to barracks in conflict zones despite

laws exempting students from military service. Most were not allowed to inform their families where they were.

The worsening situation reminds many of the summer of 1989, when 13 students — most of the AEU executive — were "disappeared." Five of their tortured bodies were found in a ravine outside the campus.

That tragedy decimated the student movement and led to two students travelling to Geneva to testify at the UN Human Rights Commission on abuses in Guatemala.

Shortly after returning home, blue-uniformed police visited the homes of Otto Peralta and Carmen Reyna and interrogated their families about their trip to Geneva. Reyna has since fled to Costa Rica.

During the month our student delegation was in Guatemala, we heard of other examples of intimidation.

Otto and some other students were followed as they left a fast food stand on their way to meet with us. The driver of a sports car with darkened windows and foreign plates rolled down his window and said, "That's the son of a bitch." He was holding a gun and later followed them to our hotel.

That same week, high school student leader Oswaldo Godoy barely escaped an attempted kidnapping by men in plain clothes. He had been active in secondary school student protests about the poor state of the education system and lack of water in public schools. He later gained entry to Canada as a refugee.

But despite these acts of intimidation, students have stepped up their efforts.

On Aug. 9, they blocked the major highway outside the public university for over an hour in sympathy with a march of citizens' groups in another part of the city. Clutching

megaphones, students called for an end to forced recruitment by the army. They also protested a proposed 47 per cent hike in electricity bills, and the use of terror tactics.

During the weekend of the Callejas and Scott murders, the AEU held its first national conference for peace. The conference was held to formulate a statement on behalf of students for the next round of talks, which will include the popular movement, made up of citizens' groups like the AEU.

Three hundred students from all over the country discussed the political situation and agreed "peace is more than the silence of the rifles": society must be changed to stop the causes of war.

And with on-going negotiations between the government, the army and the guerrillas, the strong popular movement and international pressure, there is a potential for lasting change in Guatemala.

But members from every student association pointed to the gross social injustices they must address: two per cent of the people own 70 per cent of the arable land, 54 per cent of the population lives in extreme poverty (most of these are indigenous peasants), and there is a 60 per cent illiteracy rate. To top it all off, there has been a recent outbreak of cholera.

At every event that weekend, the names of the 13 students who disappeared in 1989 were read aloud. After each name, the massed students responded, "Present in the struggle!"

And wondered who might be next.

Michael Subasic and Mika Maniwa spent a month in Guatemala this summer in support of the country's National Association of University Students (AEU).



Students from University of San Carlos (USAC) in front of National Police headquarters during march by the Mutual Support Group (GAM) through downtown Guatemala City.