

GUATEMALA

ISSUE: The human rights situation in Guatemala.

BACKGROUND:

Presidential and congressional elections were held in Guatemala on November 11, 1990. As no candidate in the presidential race attained a majority, a run-off election is scheduled for January 6, 1991, and will produce the second democratically-elected government in thirty years. This will mark the first time in Guatemala's history that there has been a peaceful transition between civilian governments.

In the 1970's and early 1980's, Guatemala's human rights record was among the world's worst. Under military governments, the security forces committed acts of violence and terror which left tens of thousands dead or "disappeared." Large-scale, systematic abuses ended, and respect for human rights began to improve, with the election of President Cerezo's civilian government in 1986. Labour unions and human rights organizations operated more openly, and freedom of expression grew. The government instituted programs to professionalize the police force, which included human rights training, and the office of the Human Rights Ombudsman, who reports to the Guatemalan Congress through the Congressional Human Rights Commission.

In spite of these encouraging trends early in the Cerezo administration, progress in improving the promotion and protection of human rights has been limited. The Cerezo administration has been unable to control human rights abuses or to open greater political space in the country. The military remains a major force, and activity by the insurgency continues. During the run-up to the November elections, violence and human rights abuses continued, including several politically-motivated killings of candidates, and attacks against business leaders and journalists.