

## GUATEMALA

ISSUE: The Human Rights situation in Guatemala.

BACKGROUND:

In January 1986, the first democratically elected government in Guatemala in thirty years took office. During the first two years of President Cerezo's mandate the civilian government seemingly managed to improve respect for human rights, but the situation has deteriorated since early 1988. Violence and human rights abuses continue and are now linked to the long run-up to elections scheduled for December 1990.

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 excesses 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 openly, freedom of expression grew, and foreign aid funds were committed to improving the standard of living of the poorest segments of society. The government instituted programs to professionalize the police force, which included human rights training, and the office of Human Rights Ombudsman which reports to the Guatemalan Congress through the Congressional Human Rights Commission.

President Cerezo's government has been prevented from taking further steps to institutionalize respect for human rights by the limited political space in Guatemala. The military remains a major force in the country and activity by the insurgency continues. Two coup attempts in the last year have served as reminders that the civilian government must maintain a delicate balancing act, which leaves little room for meaningful dialogue aimed at national reconciliation. Within this context, President Cerezo has refused to abrogate the Amnesty Law enacted by the last military government, or to order investigations into past human rights abuses.

1989 has seen a worsening of the situation, with violence and death squad activity increasing both in the countryside and in urban centres. Peasants, trade unionists and human rights workers have been targeted. A leading Christian Democrat politician, a prominent banker, and more than ten student leaders from San Carlos University, have been killed or "disappeared" since August, and the headquarters of Peace Brigades International (PBI) and the Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (GAM) were bombed. The extreme right is likely behind this violence, which appears part of a destabilization campaign linked to the long run-up to the December 1990 elections.