

HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN GUATEMALA

ISSUE

The human rights situation in Guatemala has deteriorated during the past year despite political change within Guatemala and continuing international pressure.

BACKGROUND

Guatemala is a highly stratified society, with serious inequities in the distribution of wealth. This disparity is largely mirrored in the country's ethnic division; most of the poor are indigenous people while the rich are almost exclusively "Ladinos". For decades, this imbalance has contributed to high levels of political and criminal violence within Guatemalan society, including an internal armed conflict that has lasted for more than three decades.

The optimism that followed President Ramiro de León Carpio's accession to power in 1993 was short-lived and concerns continue about his government's capacity to address the human rights situation. In retrospect, this initial optimism overlooked the fact that a change in Chief Executive by itself could not be expected to alter the fundamental power relationships within Guatemalan society. Elements within these existing power structures have continued to engage in or, at least, acquiesce in human rights violations.

There have been some positive developments during 1994. Peace negotiations with the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) resumed last January, and agreement was reached on human rights, the resettlement of uprooted populations, and the creation of a "Truth Commission". A United Nations Verification Mission (MINUGUA) has been deployed in the country since November 1994 to monitor compliance by both sides with the provisions of the Comprehensive Human Rights Accord reached last March. A constitutional referendum and Congressional elections were held last January and August, respectively and were deemed to be fair. Close to 8,000 refugees returned from Mexico in 1994. Political dialogue continues in Guatemala, despite continual threats and acts of intimidation against the leaders and members of various organizations in the civil society. The press has remained formally free and has spared no one, not even the President. The Army itself appears to remain divided between a hard-line faction and a more moderate element. A badly needed tax reform package, which would modernize the revenue system, facilitate tax collection, and improve the redistribution of resources among the population, was passed by the Congress in November. Finally, civil society, including indigenous groups, seems to be developing with increasing effectiveness.

However, serious problems persist. Continuing disenchantment with, or at best apathy vis-à-vis the existing political institutions resulted in record high rates of abstention in both the January and August electoral exercises; most indigenous people did not bother to participate. The number of returned refugees has been significantly below the 12,000 expected at the