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HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN GUATEMALA

ISSUE

A combination of poverty and ignorance among the majority of Guatemala's population and resistance to change among conservative social elements has created in Guatemala an excessively stratified society, resistant to change. This situation is aggravated by the fact that the vast majority of the poor are members of indigenous groups while the wealthy tend to be of European origin. Violence, armed confrontation and human rights abuses continue at unacceptable levels.

BACKGROUND

Guatemala's political history has been turbulent. It has been characterized by frequent coups, many of them bloody, and by an intense involvement of the security forces.

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 terror and violence which left many thousands dead or missing and precipitated the flight, mostly to Mexico, of tens of thousands of people. (Some 45,000 of the latter still remain in Mexico). With the election of President Cerezo's civilian government in 1986, respect for human rights began to improve and a number of concrete measures were taken in this direction.

Over the past several years this difficult process has continued and President Serrano, elected in 1990, has committed his government to improving respect for human rights and further steps have been taken to effect this. Members of the military and police have been arrested, and sometimes convicted for human rights violations. A commission to investigate the situation of missing persons has been established as has a Presidential Commission on Human Rights. The Human Rights Ombudsman has been outspoken and resolute in calling for the strengthening of civilian rule. Furthermore local human rights groups have been able to operate at somewhat less peril and under less harassment than has been the case in the past.

Nevertheless the human rights situation remains very grave. While there may be, from one year to another, marginally fewer violent incidents of a given type, the overall situation, in practical terms, appears to have improved only very slightly. Violence of all kinds continues at high levels and some is directed at children and at anyone who attempts to protect or defend victims of violence. Even those within the Guatemalan establishment who are trying to improve the situation, as for example the head of the Human Rights Office of the Archbishop of Guatemala, work in insecure and tenuous conditions. This was amply demonstrated in November of this year when the Defense Minister, with the support of