

Guatemala opens second front vs. narco-terrorism

by Jeffrey Steinberg

In the predawn hours of Oct. 28, a battalion of Guatemalan army troops, led by guides from the Guardia de Hacienda (Treasury police), descended into the dense jungles of the state of El Peten, near the Guatemala-Belize border, in a search-and-destroy mission targeting that nation's growing narco-terrorist menace. By the time the troops of Special Task Force COBRA emerged from the jungle 48 hours later to assume their positions as part of the security for Guatemala's Nov. 3 presidential and congressional elections, over 40 marijuana plantations—an estimated \$50 million in drugs—had been seized and destroyed. Hard evidence had been captured proving beyond a doubt that the international drug networks operating within Guatemala's borders were indistinguishable from the Soviet- and Cuban-backed terrorist organizations that have been waging a 20-year campaign of violence against the Guatemalan people.

It was a striking irony that the Guatemalan government of Gen. Oscar Humberto Mejía Victores, which has been the target of one of the most brutal economic and psychological warfare campaigns ever launched by the so-called human-rights lobby, chose the eve of the national elections to open a dramatic "second front" in the Ibero-American war against narco-terrorism, thereby securing what international observers, including U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), have described as one of the most honest and peaceful elections in recent memory anywhere in the world.

As we go to press, with well over 50% of the nearly 2 million votes already counted (an over 70% registered voter turnout, despite terrorist threats to blow up bridges and block major roadways in the outlying regions of the county), none of the eight presidential candidates had won the 51% required to secure a first-round victory. A runoff election on Dec. 8

will apparently involve frontrunner Vinicio Cerezo (641,193 votes) of Democracia Cristiana and Jorge Carpio Nicole (336,952 votes) of Union del Centro Nacional.

Far more important than the particular election outcome, however, is the fact that the Mejía Victores government has successfully outflanked the international "human rights" mafia—including the U.S. Department of State and other throwbacks to Carter-era politics in Washington—by taking on the narco-terrorists in a highly public fashion. Guatemalan government officials are privately watching to see whether the Washington Office on Latin America, a radical human-rights lobby that sent observers to the country for the elections, will honestly report on the results of the anti-drug strike. WOLA representatives Anna Howard and John Booth, according to Guatemalan sources, received a detailed briefing on the El Peten operation.

On Oct. 30, as the 72-hour anti-drug blitz was winding down, a select group of international and local journalists was invited by the public-affairs director of the Guatemalan Armed Forces, Col. Marco Antonio Castellanos Pacheco, to travel from Guatemala City to the area of operations, to witness the destruction of the marijuana plantations, inspect the captured evidence, and interview several of the dozen prisoners caught during the anti-drug effort, which was code-named Operation Guatusa-1 (the "guatusa" is a rodent that lives in El Peten's jungles and is known for its ability to maneuver through the nearly impassable terrain).

At 7:00 a.m., a busload of 16 journalists, including EIR correspondents Jeffrey Steinberg and Herbert Quinde, escorted by Colonel Castellanos, former director of the Guardia de Hacienda anti-narcotics police, entered the Aurora Air Force base in Guatemala City, boarded an Israeli-made AR-AVA transport plane, and flew 90 minutes north to the heart

of the El Peten jungle. This report is based largely on the eyewitness accounts and interviews conducted during that 12-hour tour and subsequent discussions back in the capital.

The Carter legacy

In August of this year, *EIR* released a 33-minute film documentary and a 109-page Special Report entitled "Soviet Unconventional Warfare in Ibero-America: The Case of Guatemala." The report placed a primary burden of responsibility on the Carter administration for plunging Guatemala into an economic and terrorist insurgency crisis—but the embargo imposed by Carter was never revoked by the Reagan administration. The most recent phase of that crisis has been a post-1981 invasion of the country by U.S., Colombian, and Mexican narcotics traffickers, who have seized upon Guatemala's ideal location

laboratories of Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, and the U.S. markets) and optimal soil and climate conditions, to convert it into one of the most important—albeit little-known—centers of illicit drug operations in the Western Hemisphere. From the outset, as the *EIR* study documented, the principal partners of the dopers were the Cuban- and Soviet-sponsored terrorist networks.

Prior to April 1977, when the Carter administration cut off all military and economic aid to Central America's largest and most developed nation on bogus "human rights" grounds, Guatemala was Washington's staunchest and most important ally in the region, a buffer against Soviet expansion in the Caribbean, since the Castillo Armas and Ydigoras Fuentes governments allowed Guatemala to serve as a training base and staging area for the Kennedy administration's botched Bay of Pigs invasion. Despite heavy Cuban and Soviet support for terrorist insurgencies beginning in the mid-1960s, by the early 1970s, the terrorists had been soundly defeated, and Guatemala was enjoying a solid 8% real growth rate.

The Carter embargo, combined with the delivery of Nicaragua to the hands of the Sandinistas, gave new life to the insurgency in Guatemala. Moscow had received a "green light" from Washington to wreak havoc in the hemisphere, and the Soviet bloc was not about to miss the opportunity. On Nov. 14, 1980, under the personal initiative of Fidel Castro, leaders of the four principal Guatemalan terrorist fronts—Fuerzas Armadas en Rebelde (FAR), Ejercito Guatemalteco de los Pobres (EGP), Organizacion Revolucionario del Pueblo Armado (ORPA), and Partido Guatemalteco de Trabajadores (PGT)—met in Managua to forge a joint military-political command, the Union Revolucionario Nacional de Guatemala (URNG). Bolstered by a heavy infusion of Cuban arms—predominantly Vietnam War-vintage captured U.S. equipment—the terrorists launched a "final offensive" during 1981, drawing heavily upon Indian peasants whose strings were pulled by foreign anthropologists and theology of liberationists of the Society of Jesus, the Maryknoll Order, Catholic Action, and even the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

According to one senior Guatemalan G-2 (military intelligence) official interviewed by *EIR*, at the time of the "final offensive," the URNG groups, principally the EGP, could claim over 170,000 Indians living within their "liberated zones," principally in the western highlands. A series of military fronts opened up by the EGP, ORPA, and FAR ran in an arc encircling Guatemala City to the northeast, north, and northwest, threatening to split off the capital from a large section of the country.

By 1981, Guatemala had gone through four years of isolation from all international support, including new military equipment and spare parts for the armed forces' increasingly obsolete air and ground transportation systems. The sole exception was several cash-and-carry purchases from Israel at an average 400% markup, purchases that virtually drained the foreign reserves of the Banco de Guatemala. Guatemala's economy was suffering from the Carter-organized economic embargo, the gutting of agricultural production due to terrorist attacks against plantations, and the loss of tourist revenues as the result of the country being placed on the U.S. State Department's Travel Advisory list.

Despite these grave impediments, the Guatemalan armed forces, in early 1981, launched a surprise counteroffensive against the terrorist strongholds in the western highlands. The "final offensive" turned into another serious setback for the Cuban-Soviet surrogates. International "human rights" groups like Amnesty International, OXFAM, the North American Committee on Latin America, the World Council of Churches' EPICA Task Force, and Cultural Survival screamed bloody murder.

Moscow reacted with more calculation. According to evidence from numerous Guatemalan sources, the U.S.S.R. intervened through Cuba and other surrogates to steer the Guatemalan insurgents, by now a force of no more than 2,000 hardcore Cuban- and Libyan-trained terrorists, into bed with the drug mafia, repeating a process already well underway in Colombia, Peru, and Nicaragua.

The first evidence of a Guatemalan narco-terrorist alliance took the form of a dramatic increase in the quality and volume of military hardware in the hands of the URNG component groups—at the same time that bank robberies and kidnappings of wealthy Guatemalans and representatives of foreign multinational corporations, long the preferred sources of terrorist income, precipitously dropped.

With the first seizures of large quantities of Guatemalan-grown marijuana, and, later, opium poppy, in 1983-84, a clear pattern emerged of drug production zones overlapping virtually 100% with the terrorist strongholds.

According to Guatemalan government officials interviewed by *EIR*, several recent defectors from the narco-terrorist ranks have told of deep ties between the Guatemalan FAR and the Colombian M-19, and of Cuban arms-for-pot flights direct from Havana into clandestine airstrips in the northeast of El Peten, and across the Mexican and Belizean borders.

Operation Guatusa-1

At the Kaibil School for Guatemalan elite forces in the heart of El Peten, less than 40 kilometers from the town of Melchor de Mencos near the border with Belize (see map, page 00), the staging area for the 450 troops deployed in Operation Guatusa-1, Colonel Castellanos pointed to a large map of El Peten, in which the area of operation, a large rectangular grid running north-south along the Belizean frontier, was highlighted with a thick black line.

"El Peten, occupying the northern one-third of Guatemala, has less than 70,000 inhabitants, out of a total population of well over 8 million Guatemalans," the colonel explained. "The area has been heavily targeted by the FAR, which openly calls for the creation of a separate pro-Moscow state. The revenues of the marijuana plantations have provided the terrorists with modern communications and transportation means, and with sophisticated arms—more modern and more sophisticated than those used by the Guatemalan army.

"Unless the dope-for-arms logistical base of the terrorists is broken now, the day may soon come—far sooner than Washington realizes—when Soviet MiGs will occupy the air base at Flores [in the north center of El Peten near a major lake], less than 30 minutes flying time from the Mexican oil fields and just over one hour from the Gulf coast of the United States.

"Operation Guatusa-1 was launched to crack the logistical base of the terrorists before the correlation of force shifts irreversibly to the side of the Soviet-sponsored narco-terrorists."

Indeed, Guatemalan military sources conceded that the lack of field communications systems, helicopter spare parts, and overland vehicles represented the greatest impediments to Operation Guatusa-1 and all military operations against the narco-terrorists. The capturing of over 40 marijuana plantations, some of which were secured with land mines installed by FAR terrorists, involved the use of rented trucks to deliver the troops into their areas of action, and the employment of machetes and hand-held saws to cut through the dense jungle, searching for the plantations. The United States has satellite infrared photography systems capable of identifying precise locations of drug fields; however, all such aid was denied to the Guatemalans.

With the first phase of the elections successfully behind, the big question in Guatemala City remains: Will the United States finally make good on its commitment to aid Guatemala in its war against narco-terrorism, a commitment most recently transmitted in a diplomatic cable to the U.S. embassy under George Shultz's signature? The answer to that question may very well determine whether the United States retains any friends at all south of the border. The alternative, as the Guatemalan military has emphasized, may mean Russian MiGs in El Peten.

Operation Guatusa-1: An EIR report

EIR correspondent Herbert Quinde filed the following report based on interviews conducted with officials of the Guatemalan Armed Forces who were directly involved in Operation Guatusa-1.

In a brilliant military offensive into the jungle state of El Peten, the 450-man battalion of Special Task Force COBRA dealt a devastating blow to the infrastructure of the Soviet and Cuban-backed narco-terrorist forces who had found a safe haven in the thick jungles of northern Guatemala.

Codenamed *Operation Guatusa-1*, the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Republic of Guatemala, under the direction of Gen. Lobos Zamora, ordered four companies and one platoon from the elite Kaibil Special Forces School into an area of operation next to the border with Belize. It had been more than one year's time since there was been a military presence in the area. Guatemala's military G-2 (Intelligence) had gathered information indicating that the area south of Melchor de Mencos along the Belize border and west to Dolores was inundated with marijuana plantations.

The mission orders, made explicit to each unit commander and soldier, were to seek out, capture, and destroy marijuana plantations; to hunt down and capture narcotics traffickers and terrorists, and to gather additional evidence substantiating the deep ties between the narcotics mafia and the FAR (Fuerzas Armadas en Rebelde).

In the end, over 40 marijuana plantations were found and destroyed, with crops estimated at \$30 million. Demolition equipment used by the FAR was found near the plantations, including some explosives planted as perimeter security around the fields. Twelve prisoners were taken, from whom new information confirmed that Operation Guatusa-1 had struck a key center of the international arms-for-drugs network.

Phase 1

Operation Guatusa-1 was divided into into phases of operation.

Phase 1, in many ways, was the most difficult to complete. The different units, platoons, and companies that com-