

# *MESOAMERICA*

*Volume 26, Number 4, April 2007*

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## **GUATEMALA**

### **Grim Murder Mystery Continues**

The murder mystery began on 19 Feb near Guatemala City when local residents discovered the burned remains of a vehicle that contained the bodies of three Salvadoran legislators and their driver, who were last seen alive in the capital city earlier that day (Vol. 26, No. 3).

The mystery increased when police investigators discovered that these crimes were committed by at least six Guatemalan police officers who were assigned to a special anti-organized crime unit; these rogue officers were linked to a gang of local drug dealers from Jutiapa, near the Salvadoran border. Four of the accused policemen were arrested a few days later and placed in protective custody at El Boquerón prison, but they were mysteriously murdered in their cells on 25 Feb, allegedly by a covert police death squad to prevent them from testifying against others involved.

On 27 Feb, two top officials at El Boquerón prison and 22 prison guards were arrested and charged with being accomplices in the assassination of the jailed policemen.

A month after the murder mystery began, police arrested four members of a Jutiapa drug-trafficking ring who allegedly participated in the murder of the Salvadorans on 19 Feb, and charged them with being “criminally associated” with the murdered policemen and two other police officials who are now fugitives from justice. The Public Ministry claims that this criminal gang murdered the Salvadorans after not finding the drugs or drug-money they were looking for in the Salvadorans’ vehicle.

The captured suspects from Jutiapa are Linda Castillo Orellana de Solís, owner of a vehicle used by the Salvadorans’ murderers; her half-brother Carlos Amílcar Orellana Donis, owner of the service station where the murderers obtained a container of gasoline used to burn the bodies and vehicle of the Salvadorans; and Mario Javier Lemus and Obdulio Estuardo Walemar de León Lemus who were caught on a security camera and identified as being part of the criminal gang of drug-traffickers and their police accomplices.

As fallout from these atrocious acts, Guatemalan legislators have called for the restructuring of the National Civil Police (PCN) and for the resignation of government officials who failed to provide proper oversight in matters of public security.

After Congress approved a vote of “no confidence” in his leadership, Interior Minister Carlos Vielman resigned his post irrevocably on 26 Mar, even though President Oscar Berger and members of his cabinet had expressed their confidence in Vielman, whose domain includes the prison system.

Also, on 26 Mar, PNC Director Erwin Sperisen presented his resignation to President Berger and asked for permission to return to his previous position as a member of the Guatemala City Council.

Victor Rosales, the director of the national prison system, resigned on 28 Mar, under intense political and public pressure in the backlash of the 25 Feb assassination of the four policemen who were being held in a maximum-security prison, as well as of a series of prison riots that took place on his watch.

These events and circumstances have taken their toll on the public’s confidence in the nation’s criminal justice system and the ability of public security officials to police themselves and act in the public interest.

Both Vielman and Sperisen were strongly criticized by members of opposition political parties for having allowed “death squads” to exist within the PNC, which allegedly were dedicated mainly to conducting “extra-judicial executions” of suspected delinquents. Hundreds of corrupt police officers have been found to be members of organized criminal gangs who are involved in various illicit activities, such as bribery, kidnapping, murder and drug, weapons and human trafficking.

### **UN Report Links Police to Death Squads and Social Cleansing**

On 23 Mar, a UN report by Philip Alson linked Guatemalan police to death squads and social cleansing; this includes regular members of the PNC and agents of the Division of Criminal Investigation. Guatemalan police extra-judicially executed at least 200 gang members during ’06 and their bodies dumped along roadsides as a warning to others, stated Alson.

According to this report, the culture of impunity in Guatemala erodes trust in the criminal justice system and discredits its government internationally. More than 1,000 police officers have been fired during the past 2½ years, and 250 former police officials are now behind bars awaiting trial on charges of murder, kidnapping and/or drug dealing.

### **III Indigenous Summit Held**

On 26-30 Mar, the Third Summit of Indigenous Peoples and Nationalities of Abya Yala was held in the sacred Mayan city of Iximché (located about 87 km west of Guatemala City), with 1,800 participants from Indigenous communities throughout the Western Hemisphere.

Abya Yala is an expression in the Kuna language that means “Mature Earth.” It is a pre-Colombian word that is used by Indigenous peoples today to identify their ancestral homeland, the entire American continent. The Kuna nation exists in the Kuna-Yala region (geographically shared by the modern countries of Panama and Colombia) on the Isthmus of Panama, with approximately 40,000 inhabitants, mostly living in the San Blas islands and along the Caribbean coast of Panama. The natives of the Kuna nation have been distinguished for their continuous struggles to maintain the autonomy of their own region and to defend it from technological and hydrological development that have had not only ecological but also culturally-disastrous consequences for the Kuna communities.

“We are aboriginal peoples from Abya Yala. Our ancestors, our grandparents, taught us how to love and revere our bountiful Mother Earth (Pacha Mama) and how to live in harmony and freedom with

the natural and spiritual beings that inhabit Her. Our political, economic, social and cultural institutions are a heritage from our ancestors and form the foundations to build our future.”

The Declaration of Iximché reaffirmed the previous Declaration of Teotihuacán from the first conference held in Mexico in '00, and the Declaration of Kito from the second conference held in Ecuador in '04. These declarations reiterate the Indigenous peoples' struggle to protect Pacha Mama and reclaim their ancestral lands, autonomy and right of self-determination in the modern world. Included in these declarations are the following two statements that give a summation of their concerns:

We denounce that national governments in the Americas are increasingly using violent repression, and this is expressed in: the violation of our human rights and our rights as Peoples; the criminalization of our actions for the defense of life and religious ceremonies, paramilitarization, removal from our lands, military occupation, the corruption of leaders and local authorities; promotion of projects to “compensate” the damage done by transnational corporations; the so-called equitable benefit-sharing; and forced migration. They promote division, confrontation and armed conflict among the communities to impose their excluding, racist and oppressive policies.

We firmly oppose the development of plans such as the South American Regional Plan for Infrastructure Integration (IIRSA); Plan Puebla Panama; Plan Patriota; Plan Colombia; Plan Dignidad; Plan Andino, and the establishment of military bases. We also oppose the adoption of the FTAA and FTAs, which are fostered by the WTO for the benefit of the looter countries of the world. They only intend to create infrastructures to facilitate the circulation of their goods, to exploit natural resources on our lands and territories, and to protect transnational corporations. We consider them invasion plans for plundering, destruction and death.

### **Teachers Protest in Guatemala City**

Thousands of public school teachers from throughout the country marched peacefully through the historical section of Guatemala City on 21 Mar to demand needed educational reforms, salary increases and government-sponsored nutrition programs for their students. The Union of Guatemalan Educational Workers (STEG) and the National Assembly of Educators (ANM) sponsored the protest.

During the march, the educators chanted, “A people without education is a people without peace” and “We are teachers not delinquents.” Demonstrators denounced President Berger for not fulfilling his campaign promise to implement a much-needed nutrition program for students in the nation's 17,400 public schools, despite the fact that school administrators continually have demanded its implementation.

After the protest march ended, President Berger promised to request that Congress approve additional funds for the public education budget, which would cover the student nutrition program, salary increases for teachers, and the creation of 6,700 new teaching positions as requested by the Ministry of Public Education.

—*Clifton L. Holland*