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GUATEMALA

Álvarez Ruiz to Finally Face Trial

Friday, 10 Dec, proved to be a good day for family members and friends who lost loved ones in the 31 Jan '80 assault on the Spanish Embassy in Guatemala City. The Spanish National Court ordered the detainment of Donaldo Álvarez Ruiz, former Minister of Interior during the Romeo Lucas García regime ('78-'82). He is accused of crimes of torture, seven assassinations, and an assassination attempt against citizens of Spain.

The following Monday, a federal judge in Mexico ordered the capture of Álvarez, who had been living in Mexico since Mar '82. Álvarez, now 73-years-old, is finally facing charges for his involvement in the Spanish Embassy fire, which resulted in the death of 37 individuals, including the father of '92 Noble Peace Prize Laureate Rigoberta Menchú. Her father, accompanied by students and workers, had peacefully taken over the Spanish Embassy in a demonstration against the ongoing violence throughout the countryside. Security forces responded by attacking the embassy, which produced a fire and the subsequent deaths of the non-violent demonstrators inside.

Álvarez was also partially responsible for the assassination of four Spanish priests during the Lucas García regime. José María Gran, Faustino Villanueva and Juan Alonzo Fernández were murdered in June '80, July '80 and Feb '81 respectively, and Carlos Pérez Alonzo was kidnapped on 2 Aug '81 and disappeared.

The detainment of Álvarez Ruiz is an encouraging step in the slow process of convicting former military and political leaders in Guatemala for their murderous acts throughout the 36-year civil war that ended with the signing of the May '96 peace accords. Activist and director of the Rigoberta Menchú Foundation Gustavo Meoño hopes that the Supreme Court in Guatemala will take the time to interview key witnesses, who are unable to travel to Spain for the trial, and send their declarations to the Spanish National Court. Other former military leaders still facing charges are Efraín Ríos Montt, Oscar Huberto Mejía Víctores, Benedicto y Romeo Lucas García, Germán Chupina Barahona and civilian Pedro García Arredondo.

Still No Break for the Women of Guatemala

In '04 there were 527 women murdered in Guatemala. This number exceeds the femicide rate for '03 by 144 women. According to Ana María Monzón, President of the National Union for Guatemalan Women (UNAMG), the women of Guatemala are afraid to exercise their inherent rights as citizens. This fear is a direct result of the violence that has derived from a patriarchal society, where the majority of the population is plagued by poor living conditions and extreme poverty.

Despite the government's promise to focus on preventing and controlling violence against women in '05, Monzón remains skeptical. She feels that even though the National Police Force (PNC) has defined a proposal to provide sufficient protection for women, they appear to be the same solutions that have been seen in the past. She suggests that legitimate change will only occur if the government gets rid of corruption inside the public security agencies and if it employs professionals who will work to make a positive difference in Guatemala.

On 14 Nov '04, Minister of Interior Carlos Vielman announced the dismissal of 187 agents from the PNC because of their inability to perform their jobs effectively. Vielman explained that this was part of a plan to purify and stabilize the PNC.

In '04, with 22 agents working in the Femicide Department, the PNC was able to arrest 77 murderers and resolve 142 cases. However, the dramatic decrease in the number of agents currently working for the PNC means that there are now only five agents to investigate 257 cases pending, with more occurring everyday. The Femicide Department is also limited to conducting investigations in the Guatemala City area, because it has only one vehicle, three computers and a telephone with which to work.

The European Commission proposed a plan to help tackle the issues of violence against women and domestic violence, and to improve health conditions for the people in the country who were most affected by hurricane Mitch. In the past month, the Extension Program for the Instruction of Basic Health has held numerous workshops and discussions regarding women's health and the importance of strengthening and empowering women in their quest to lead healthier lifestyles.

The government has also issued a response to the ongoing violence that not only affects women, but all Guatemalans. On 10 Jan, Vielman stated that a new security plan is being implemented in which the government will seek community support, a system of civilian intelligence, improve the equipment of the PNC and improve coordination with other agencies. President Berger has also approved the use of private guard services in areas that are most affected by violent crime, and proposed the improvement of communication between state organizations and public ministers. The goal of the administration in the upcoming year is to strengthen citizen security while battling violence, and improve the infrastructure and education system.

Air Traffic Controller Strike Proves Costly

Five air traffic controllers were arrested and placed in preventive custody on 11 Jan for their involvement in a strike that resulted in the loss of approximately \$6.16 million for Guatemala. On 15 Jan, a judge released the five controllers on bail. A total of 56 employees were involved in the strike;

their demands were an increase in salary of \$644 a month, and the renewal of their contracts that expired 31 Dec '04. Their average monthly salaries at the time of the strike were \$2,190.

President Berger ordered that the 56 air traffic controllers be dismissed from their jobs without the possibility of being rehired. In order to keep the airports open, temporary professionals from Mexico, Peru, El Salvador and Honduras are now working in place of the employees on strike. However, the staffing director stated that the main objective is to hire other Central American air traffic controllers, as opposed to outsourcing more Central American jobs.

Representatives from unions in Central America have expressed their concern and outrage for the 56 air traffic personnel who lost their jobs. Vice president of the Central American Air Transit Technical Advisory Group (GAT), Leonardo Guillén, emphasized that this particular strike is Guatemala's problem but government agencies throughout Central America are generally unaware of the specialization and training required to work as an air traffic controller.

Meanwhile, 3,200 airline passengers were unable to travel on 11 and 12 of Jan. This resulted in a pile-up of hundreds of passengers in the terminal areas of La Aurora International Airport who had to reschedule their flights. Some airline companies, including Delta and Continental Airlines, added one more flight to their itineraries in order to accommodate the delayed travelers.

Guatemalan Economic Update

Last year proved to be taxing for all Central American countries, as each one surpassed their predicted limits of inflation increases. The Bank of Guatemala predicted an increase of inflation between 4% and 6%. Unfortunately, in '04 inflation rose 9.23% compared to a 5.85% increase in '03. The National Institute for Statistics suggested that the situation grew worse in the past few months due to uncontrollable outside issues, such as the increase in the prices of petroleum and steel.

On 14 Jan, in a statement to Congress, President Berger emphasized the positive changes that have been made during his administration. Berger pointed out that he has decreased the number of military personnel from 27,214 to 15,500, as well as cutback the military budget from \$184.2 million in '03 to \$118 million in '04. The financial resources that once went to the armed forces are now being used for social programs.

Berger also discussed an increase in the Gross Domestic Product of 2.7% in '04 and an 11.21% increase in exports, which netted \$4.9 billion for Guatemala. However, percentages and numbers mean very little to those Guatemalans who are part of the 80% affected by poverty. In a poll published on 14 Jan, 77% of Guatemalans felt that President Berger has left his promises to combat poverty and violence.

Frontrunner for Drug Trafficking

Guatemala has been fighting an uphill battle against drug trafficking during the past few years and in '04 it lost the war. Only 4.2 tons of the estimated 150 tons of drugs that passed through the country were confiscated. Guatemala has become the primary transshipment point for drug trafficking from South America to the US.

The US has criticized the Guatemalan government for its failure to work on the eradication of drugtrafficking, suggesting that if changes are not made to improve the situation it could be decertified and sanctioned as one of the nations in the world not participating in the war against drugs.

—*Katie Gilman*