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GUATEMALA

Taiwan and Guatemala Sign Accords

Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian welcomed Guatemalan President Oscar Berger to Taiwan with military honors on 20 June. The two leaders signed accords of cooperation that will provide Guatemala with millions of dollars in new foreign aid.

Berger is the first national leader of a diplomatic ally to visit Taiwan since Costa Rica switched allegiance to the People's Republic of China earlier this month.

Chen said bilateral trade had showed substantial growth and bilateral relations had become stronger since the two countries signed a free trade agreement (FTA) on 1 July last year. During the meeting after the ceremony, Chen said he was happy to see that Berger had paid a visit to the country not long after Chen invited him to come in Jan when the two met at the inauguration of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega.

After the recent diplomatic setback with Costa Rica, Chen said he appreciated Berger's resistance to domestic and international pressure in visiting Taiwan as planned.

Berger said that Guatemala's support for Taiwan did not come from just him alone but from all Guatemalans, and that his country would support the Taiwanese government's participation in international organizations "in the common defense of democracy and liberty."

Taiwan agreed to donate \$40 million for the rehabilitation and widening of Highway CA-9 Norte, from Puente Agua Caliente-Corozal to Sanarate in El Progreso, and to provide \$10 million for making security and infrastructural improvements to Guatemala's national prison system. The latter includes the building of a new prison facility for 1,200 prisoners at the Pavón Rehabilitation Farm in Fraijanes.

Berger and his aides also met with directors of the giant petrochemical Formosa Plastics to discuss investment possibilities in Guatemala, specifically regarding the building of a new petroleum refinery in Puerto Quetzal, Escuintla, to supply the Central American market, and the distribution of electrical energy through a regional Central American grid.

Previous to Berger's visit to Taiwan, Taiwanese representatives visited Guatemala and agreed to provide the equipment to install a new air quality monitoring station in Guatemala City, under the supervision of the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources.

The CICIG Debate Continues

While public debate continues about the pros and cons of creating an International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (known as CICIG in Spanish), many political parties have opted to avoid discussion on the issue by having their legislators abandon the congressional plenary in order to break the quorum needed to discuss and ratify the proposal.

Breaking quorum was the order of the day for legislators of the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG), the party of former military dictator Gen. Ríos-Montt and former President Alfonso Portillo; the FRG has stated its opposition to the creation of CICIG, whereas legislators of President Berger's National Advance Party (PAN) and those of the National Unity of Hope (UNE) generally have supported the measure.

While some legislators argued that their absence from Congress was due to their party's campaign schedule, many observers (editorialists, columnists, NGO leaders, etc.) stated that this tactic was a deliberate attempt to block discussion and approval of CICIG, because those who are opposed to the measure are fearful of exposing themselves and their parties to public and international scrutiny.

Mario Taracena of UNE believes that the real reason some legislators run away from Congress when CICIG is on the agenda is that "organized crime is attempting to block this law proposal, because many of its soldiers are here among us. I don't want to name names, because I want to keep on living," he stated.

According to Pablo Duarte of the Unionista Party, "CICIG is a mechanism, promoted by the US, to investigate drug-traffickers and money-launderers; those who are dedicated to these kinds of activities surely must be afraid."

If approved, the CICIG would seek to expose those who are members of, or associated with, "parallel powers" (read: corrupt political and business groups and organized-crime networks) and "clandestine security forces" (read: death squads).

This would be a serious threat to members of the ruling business elite and political class and to some bureaucrats in government institutions (including judicial, military and police agencies) where cronyism, illicit enrichment, abuse of power, extortion, vengeance and violence are common practices, according to human rights experts such as the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), the Myrna Mack Foundation and the Guatemalan Human Rights Ombudsman.

In order to guarantee the full development of their illicit activities, these "parallel powers" penetrate and corrupt State institutions, by means of the direct participation of State agents or by placing their own soldiers or cronies within these institutions, using political power and influence to manipulate the system and to name their own people in key positions where they can carry out their hidden agenda. These same criminal groups have penetrated the State security forces and have formed clandestine networks of enforcers and death squads to commit acts of intimidation and violence for the purpose of neutralizing their opponents and obstructing justice and, thereby, acquiring greater quotas of power and influence, according to a recent report by the Myrna Mack Foundation.

Berger: Crime and Violence is Out of Hand!

On 7 June, President Berger publicly recognized that the current problems of crime and violence in Guatemala are beyond the State's capacity to resolve immediately, while reporting that some progress has been made by security forces.

One of the serious crime problems to be resolved is a wave of killings of bus drivers who have refused to give in to the extortion demands of neighborhood street gangs that charge a daily fee of \$15 per bus to not assault the bus driver or his passengers.

However, on 7 June, the National Civil Police (PCN) reported the capture of 33 people, the majority of whom were gang members (known as *pandilleros*); they were accused of extorting bus drivers and assaulting pedestrians in various zones of Guatemala City. Most of those arrested had previous criminal records for assault and robbery, and were carrying illegal weapons and/or drugs when apprehended.

So far this year, according to official police reports, at least 61 bus drivers have been murdered, nine more than in all the previous year when only 52 cases were reported. On the other hand, the Association of Urban Transportation Business Owners (AETU) reported that an average of 240 assaults occur daily on their buses, which affect an estimated 10,000 passengers. In addition, an estimated 1,000 bus drivers are obligated to pay *pandilleros* an average of \$15 daily to circulate within neighborhoods controlled by these street gangs.

On 7 June, in an effort to curb this crime wave, President Berger ordered that an additional 200 military troops accompany PCN agents in patrolling city streets and bus routes on a daily basis. The police authorities believe that "a group of 15 undocumented Central American immigrants" may be responsible for the latest increase in crime on city busses.

However, the killing of another bus driver and the wounding of six of his passengers by *pandilleros* on 9 June in Guatemala City prompted the AETU to suspend all bus service in the northeast sector of the capital, and to demand that the government take control of this situation immediately. At least 250 bus drivers and their assistants (who collect the bus fares from passengers) participated in this boycott, which affected an estimated 30,000 customers daily. This was the fourth such boycott in less than a month.

Police authorities reported that this specific crime was committed by a group of armed gang members who intercepted the bus in their own vehicle, and using AK-47s and automatic pistols attacked the bus driver and passengers "as an act of vengeance against bus drivers who refuse to pay the extortion demanded."

Whereas on 10 June more than 1,500 police and soldiers were patrolling 150 high-risk areas of Guatemala City and surrounding municipalities, by 15 June that number had been increased to 2,400, according to Minister of the Interior Adela de Torrebiarte. The new public security strategy includes the use of undercover agents aboard busses and a stronger police presence in bus terminals and at bus stops in high-risk areas, in an effort to calm public fears and as a deterrent to further assaults and murders in the urban transportation system, stated Torrebiarte.

New Public Security Offensive

On 15 June, a combined force of 500 police and army soldiers began a massive anti-crime operation in the marginalized community of Ciudad del Sol, located in the municipality of Villa Nueva about 20 km south of the capital city, where scores of residents had abandoned their homes due to the threat of extortions, kidnappings, sexual assaults and other forms of violence by street gangs (youths) and other organized crime elements (older gangsters).

In one day, from early morning to late at night, public security units conducted more than 40 search-and-seizures of suspected criminals in Ciudad del Sol, which resulted in the arrest of 20 men and women and the confiscation of illegal firearms, drugs and hordes of cash from a variety of suspected illegal activities. This security operation was conducted after months of intelligence gathering to detect who the crime leaders were and where they could be found.

According to Interior Minister Torrebiarte, *pandilleros* had occupied at least 80 homes that had been abandoned by their owners in this community during '07, where bands of delinquents controlled the streets, both day and night. Ciudad del Sol had become a center for drug-trafficking in Villa Nueva, where youth gangs and organized crime networks worked together in the packaging and distribution of illegal drugs, stated Torrebiarte.

Land Disputes: Squatters Forcibly Removed by Security Forces

Two areas of the country where groups of *campesino* squatters have been forcibly removed recently by the National Civil Police are in the communities of San Isidro and San Antonio in Sierra de las Minas, municipality of Los Amates, Izabal department; and in the community of La Nueva Esperanza, located within the Sierra del Lacandón National Park, in the municipality of La Libertad, Petén department, adjacent to the Mexican border.

On 14 June, public security forces arrived in the communities of San Isidro and San Antonio without previous notification and without delivering any formal legal documents, where they forced the inhabitants—how many is unknown—to leave immediately (the frightened people offered no resistance) and proceeded to burn their dwellings and crops (mainly corn and beans) in an effort to keep them from returning and rebuilding in this protected area, according to CERIGUA. Many of the displaced families, including small children and elderly persons, had to spend the night in the open air exposed to the elements, which put their health at risk, reported Herculano Pop, a spokesman for the Human Rights Office.

The situation was somewhat different in the community of La Nueva Esperanza, where approximately 60 *campesino* squatter families—about 400 people—were forcibly dislodged from their rustic dwellings on 24 June by elements of the Guatemalan Army, the National Civil Police and agents of the National Council for Protected Areas (CONAP). The public security forces proceeded to destroy and burn the squatter's dwellings and crops, as is customary in such situations.

Although most of these families fled into nearby Mexican territory, a group of about 170 *campesinos* returned to the community on 25 June, armed with clubs, machetes and firearms, with the intention of reclaiming “their” lands after the security forces had left the area.

On the one hand, human rights advocates denounced the violent removal of the squatters by public security forces and defended the *campesinos*' rights to land on which they had lived for about eight years, and on the other hand CONAP officials stated that these actions were carried out under a

judicial order as part of a coordinated effort to protect the environment of the Mayan Biosphere Reserve, where the squatters were destroying the virgin forest.

The Sierra del Lacandón National Park was created in '90 with the status of a “highly protected area” within the bi-national Mayan Biosphere Reserve, and it is the second-largest national park in Guatemala. This reserve is facing critical threats because of constant invasions by squatters who use slash-and-burn methods to clear the virgin forest and plant their crops (usually corn and beans) and by cattle ranchers and illegal loggers, and because of frequent forest fires that destroy vast areas of flora and fauna.

—*Clifton L. Holland*