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GUATEMALA

National Civil Police Integrates Former Soldiers

Minister of Defense Francisco Bermúdez has recruited 2,092 former soldiers to serve in the Special Forces Unit for Citizen Security of the National Civil Police (PNC). Guatemalan law permits the Minister of Defense to place 3,000 former soldiers in the PNC without direct government approval.

Vice President Eduardo Stein supported Bermúdez' actions and deflected criticism from the international community. "The former soldiers that will be integrated into the PNC will only be responsible for patrolling," stated Stein; "their only responsibility will be to accompany the PNC." Arresting delinquents does not fall under the jurisdiction of the former soldiers.

Both Stein and President Oscar Berger stated that this is not an act of PNC militarization. The former soldiers have been assigned to the police force to assist in patrolling areas of high violence. These actions are proposed as temporary and will continue only for one year as an emergency measure to guarantee the security of Guatemala, according to Stein.

This integration follows a recent 600-agent deficit affecting the PNC. Various abuses of authority in '04 resulted in the consequential removal of some offenders for acts that include murder, rape, extortion, illegal raids and robbery (Vol. 24, No. 2). Criminal prosecution of these crimes concluded in '05.

Human rights organizations have expressed criticism regarding Bermúdez' actions, arguing that these measures infringe on the '96 Peace Accords and increase the potential hazard of former soldiers abusing power and violating fundamental human rights, as occurred often throughout the 36-year civil war. Opponents characterize the measures as illegal and fear that a military presence in the PNC breaches the Peace Accords Framework Law that was created to reduce military strength and the ability to remilitarize the PNC.

Public security, by law, is a responsibility of the PNC. "The military, as it has demonstrated throughout Guatemalan history, would not provide any additional value to the police force," indicated Anders

Kompass from the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights; “they are not trained to combat delinquency.”

The first 1,200 former soldiers that compose the Special Forces Unit for Citizen Security began training on 1 Mar. A majority of these former soldiers have not been active in military service for the past five years and will be trained for 40 days prior to patrolling the streets. Courses include education in police tactics and human rights. The joint patrols will begin 9 Apr during Easter week.

Minister of Education Receives a Vote of No Confidence

Congress gave a vote of no confidence to Minister of Education María del Carmen Aceña on 21 Feb, after exceeding the necessary 80 votes to send the measure to President Berger for ratification in order to force her resignation. After three weeks of discussion promoted by the National Unity of Hope Party and six hours of legislative questioning, 88 legislators voted against Aceña, 43 legislators voted in support, and 27 abstained.

The president must ratify the measure or send it back to the National Assembly. If the measure is returned to the National Assembly, eight days are allowed to continue discussion of the matter before a second attempt can be made to remove the minister without presidential approval; however, second-round voting requires 105 votes to overturn a presidential veto.

Berger and Stein have reiterated their unquestionable support for Aceña. “The Minister of Education has all of my backing and support because she has demonstrated her ability to manage the education of our country,” said Berger following the vote, “We [Berger and Stein] are going to repeal the vote of no confidence.”

According to legislator Pablo Duarte, the National Assembly will be unable to get the necessary 105 votes to force Aceña’s resignation without presidential approval. However, Aceña’s opponents characterized their efforts as successful. “We demonstrated that there are anomalies and poor administration in that position,” indicated Iván Arévalo, a member of the Guatemalan Republican Front that voted against Aceña.

Prior to the vote, the Teacher’s National Assembly (ANM) warned of the need to pursue educational reforms. ANM’s inability to have a dialogue on education reform with Aceña increased feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration with Aceña and the current system. The attempted removal of Aceña was in reaction to her approach to education as a business, which denied “major and better progress in education.” Legislators felt limited in their ability to pursue educational reform without the assistance of Aceña. This vote was the first political sanction during the Grand National Alliance administration.

However, some public support for Aceña was unmistakable after 10,000 people united at the Constitutional Plaza on 26 Feb to express satisfaction with her performance. A telephone poll conducted by *Vox Latina* in Feb showed that 54% of respondents were against the decision of no confidence, while 31% were in favor and 15% did not respond. The same study showed that 47.5% of respondents favored keeping Aceña as Minister of Education and 37% wanted her resignation. Ninety-four percent demanded a better performance by the minister.

Aceña confirmed that she understands the complexity of the issue and is now “convinced that there are students, parents and teachers who want a change in the educational system.” She thanked those who supported her throughout this process and assured them that she would correct her errors and regain the confidence of the legislators.

Evidence of Social Cleansing Groups

At least 98 murders that occurred within the first two months of this year have been attributed to civil “social cleansing” groups who have decided to use their own methods to eliminate crime. News agencies report daily disappearances of young, alleged gang members who have been savagely murdered in a distinct manner that has been characterized as “social cleansing.”

These self-appointed anti-crime squads have been targeting suspected delinquents, marijuana dealers and individuals believed to be practicing witchcraft; however, some deaths have resulted from mistaken identity, false accusations or petty feuds. Last year, approximately 3,000 murders were attributed to the actions of these social cleansing groups and many predict this year’s total will exceed that number. This trend resurrects memories of the 36-year civil war that claimed the lives of 200,000 individuals before concluding with the ’96 Peace Accords.

To the surprise of many, the PNC apprehended seven suspected members of “The People’s Social Cleansing Group” during the first week of Feb after a 30-minute gun battle. This civilian organization had been operating an illegal checkpoint on a rural road near Lake Atitlán, charging passing motorists one dollar in exchange for a receipt promising safe passage for two years.

The Attorney General’s Office of Human Rights and the UN have attempted to address this issue and place it in the public spotlight; however, many citizens seem content with the actions of these civilian vigilante organizations. “Robberies were way down, but of course homicides went up,” responded a police officer with a grim smile. The state appears to be indirectly guilty of supporting this practice of social cleansing. Frequently, the PNC condones these actions and fails to investigate the murders.

—*Jason Eichorst*