

Human Rights Is Also an Issue in Honduras

By STEPHEN KINZER

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras — Raul Omar Vasquez Amaya, who died in police custody two weeks ago, might easily have passed unnoticed, becoming just another entry on the long list of young Latin Americans from Guatemala to Argentina who have been killed by Government officials. But the Vasquez case exploded into public scandal. A few days after the facts became known, the chief of the National Intelligence Directorate, Maj. Juan Blas Salazar Meza, was transferred. The Armed Forces Commander, Gen. Gustavo Alvarez Martinez, promised the crime would be investigated and that those responsible would be "punished with the full force of the law."

Mr. Vasquez's arrest came only days after President Reagan's commission on Central America recommended large increases in American military and economic aid for Honduras and other pro-Western Govern-

ments in the region. The Administration considers Honduras critical to its plan to turn back leftist challenges. It is considering establishing what General Alvarez calls a "mixed base" in Honduras, where American and Honduran troops would be stationed together.

The Honduran Government and its friends in the White House are anxious to demonstrate that constitutional rule is taking hold in Tegucigalpa. American officials here, who have been privately critical of Major Blas Salazar, were pleased at his transfer. "It's a constant battle keeping the security forces under control," an American diplomat said.

The latest victim, Mr. Vasquez, was a university student reportedly engaged in trafficking in dollars, not a crime in Honduras. There were rumors that he may have had differences with associates. He was detained by three policemen at 8:30 P.M. on Jan. 10. The next day, his wife received a telephone call telling her where she could pick up her husband's body.

Major Blas Salazar readily admitted to reporters that his men had arrested Mr. Vasquez. "But he took ill," the major said, "and we were taking him to the hospital. As we were passing the stadium, he died suffering from pneumonia." The official coroner's report, however, listed the cause of death as homicide by blows to the head. Mr. Vasquez's widow allowed photographers to take pictures of the corpse, which was displayed. "Law Student Dies Under Torture in Police Cell," said the headline in the daily *El Heraldo*.

Mr. Vasquez, it was learned, had been a member of the leading right-wing organization at the university and had many influential friends there. The university rector, Oswaldo Ramos Soto, condemned the killing as a "barbarous act." The student federation, controlled by a pro-Government group, called for an exhaustive investigation.

Mr. Vasquez's political leanings stirred high-level interest in his case, and the surprisingly frank affirmation by Major Blas Salazar that his death occurred in police custody was seen in some quarters as a challenge

to officers trying to improve the image of the military. Under the circumstances, the coroner felt free to file a candid death certificate and the press did not hesitate to support it. "It was quite an unusual case," said a Western diplomat who closely follows the Government's human rights practices. "The police were caught in a blatant lie. The facts simply could not be explained away."

General Alvarez, who is widely regarded as the most powerful man in Honduras, moved quickly to transfer Major Blas Salazar to an unspecified post in the security forces and to arrest three soldiers said to be implicated in the crime. The new chief of the investigating police is Maj. Guillermo Pinel Cally, a recent graduate of general staff training at the United States Army School of the Americas in Panama.

The prevalence of human rights abuses in Honduras is disputed. The country has not experienced the wanton mass killings common in some nearby countries. President Roberto Suazo Cordova likes to note that few, if any, Hondurans have fled into exile, while thousands of refugees have come here from Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua.

American officials say the Honduran judicial system is in need of overhaul and that Honduran detectives are often uneducated and at times brutal. But they also say President Suazo and General Alvarez are actively working to improve the system. "The very fast action in the case of Major Blas Salazar will serve as a powerful warning to his successor that abuse of prisoners will not be tolerated," an American diplomat asserted.

Some Honduran human rights advocates, however, are less certain. They fear that General Alvarez, a dedicated anti-Communist who believes his country is in danger of subversion or attack, may be prepared to use whatever means he considers necessary to prevent the spread of threatening doctrines or practices. The Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in Honduras lists 53 political prisoners. Some of them have been accused of spying for Nicaragua; others are being held without charges. Last year, 28 people disappeared after being taken into custody by police agents, the committee added.

"There are elements within the Army that specialize in repression," said Ramon Custodio, a physician who heads the rights group. He said he doubted the removal of Major Blas Salazar would make a substantial difference in police behavior. "They are just changing the facade for a while," he said. "If I saw an investigation of every case, then I would think there was going to be a change."



Black Star/James Nechney
Woman protesting disappearance of a relative in Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

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The Honduras

THE PENTAGON has submitted to Congress a detailed list of Honduran requests as well as items wanted for El Salvador. A letter to the chairman of the Foreign Operations Subcommittee of the House of Representatives from General Graves of the Defence Security Assistance Agency makes clear that the US is prepared to give Honduras almost \$3.9 million in military aid and training:
 The arms list for Honduras includes M-16 and M-14 rifles, sidearms, grenade launchers, mortars, and recoilless rifles as well as patrol boats, trucks, jeeps, communication equipment and spare parts for aircraft and helicopters.

Jack Anderson

Why another Somoza?

Honduras

THE ERA of banana-republic dictators propped up by U.S. military aid is dead, but the Carter administration refuses to give it a decent burial. Instead, the president seems determined to add still another sorry chapter to the chronicle of Yankee imperialism in Central America. The administration apparently has chosen Honduras to be our new "Nicaragua" — a dependable satellite, bought and paid for by American military and economic largesse.

In secret meetings with the Pentagon's emissary, Maj. Gen. Robert L. Schweitzer, the Honduran military junta was told specifically that it is expected to assume the regional role played for years by Nicaragua's Anastasio Somoza — to become a bulwark of anti-communism against the pressures of popular revolt. Guns and dollars will flow if the regime achieves legitimacy in this month's elections.

army's 900-man officers corps have petitioned the junta to take more moderate positions on agrarian reform, the judicial system and human rights. The general view is that Honduras will swing to the right after the elections. The junta is already laying plans to tighten its control. One secret internal memorandum discusses ways to get rid of dissenters, including the time-honored practice of shipping "unreliable" officers to distant diplomatic posts.

And the junta's chief, Brig. Gen. Policarpo Paz Garcia, may become the National Party's candidate for president. Certainly he is acting like a candidate, milking his recent meeting with Jimmy Carter at the White House for all the prestige and propaganda he could.

~~The Carter administration, rebuffed embarrassingly in Nicaragua and unable to influence events effectively in Guatemala and El Salvador, has seized upon Honduras as the opportunity for a show of strength. The administration is planning to give the 15,000-man Honduran army \$500,000 in training funds, with an anticipated \$5 million in aid and equipment next year.~~

~~Military aid is the last thing Honduras needs. Its air force is considered to be the best in Central America, its officers are already highly trained, and the guerrillas have been ineffective in the country. All the U.S. armaments will do is enable the generals to solidify their control — or pave the way for yet another military coup.~~

The big question, of course, is why the Carter administration feels the need for another Somoza. The last-ditch U.S. defense of the hated Nicaraguan tyrant won us no friends among the people of Latin America.

Time was when the United States was the symbol of hope for the oppressed peasants of South and Central America. But in recent years, as the United States propped up one general after another, the oppressed people of Latin America have turned to another symbol of hope — Fidel Castro's Cuba. It's a false hope, but they have no way of knowing that.

Unfortunately, that legitimacy will be cosmetic at best. All the evidence indicates that the elections will be a complete sham. The military-backed National Party is the pre-ordained winner. The Christian Democrats don't even have a place on the ballot. Voter registration is a farce. Birth certificates — required at registration — conveniently disappear if the prospective voter is not a known National Party supporter.

Nine months ago, my associate Bob Sherman traveled throughout Honduras, interviewing business leaders, politicians, students, workers and religious leaders to assess the chances for democratic change. The signs were hopeful, and I wrote then that, if the junta made good on its pledge of free elections, "Honduras could become a showcase of peaceful democracy in Latin America."

But that optimistic hope has been dashed by the junta. The elections have generated little interest, Honduran sources explained, because everyone knows nothing will change. "The National Party is controlled by the military, and they will win," said one source. "Life will not improve, it will get worse."

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