

# A storm gathers among the G

By **MARLISE SIMONS**

Washington Post

**GUATEMALA CITY** — Twice, each year, the Guatemalan military heads for the country's jungle mountains, combing highland villages and hamlets looking for Indian boys. Soldiers stake out cornfields, wait outside churches for mass to end, and descend on crowds on market day.

Guided by the local military commissioner, corporals and sergeants begin the chase, grabbing the young Indians by their embroidered cummerbunds or by their hair, using ropes when necessary. At times, shots ring out as terrified boys run away.

The new "conscripts" — taken under the law requiring universal military service and often numbering 30 to 50 from each village — are then locked up in the local jail. They are sorted out and often

beaten and starved for two or three days until military trucks take them to an Army camp hundreds of miles away.

As in much of Latin America, the well-to-do here avoid the compulsory military service through bribes or influence. Officers tend to come from lower middle- or middle-class white families. Many of them — 3,334 between 1950 and 1977, when Guatemala refused U.S. military aid over human rights criticism — were trained by the Penagon.

But two-thirds of the close to 11,000 troops, the backbone of the military government headed by Gen. Romeo Lucas Garcia, consists largely of these press-ganged Indians.

More than half of this Central American country's 6 million people are Indians. Families often spend months looking for their sons after the roundups. The peasants, whose culture is built on a

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## Perspective

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Guatemala's Indians, descendants of the Mayans, are the last large indigenous culture in Central America. They have managed, despite pressures from both leftist guerrillas seeking to overthrow

the military government and the military itself, to remain aloof from the political violence that has wracked the country for decades.

But during the past five years, the Guatemalan military described by international human rights groups as among the most repressive in Latin America, has acted increasingly against the Indians — seizing their land on behalf of the powerful, frequently kidnaping, torturing and killing local leaders perceived as threats to the status quo.

While the Indians have long rejected the values of the white society that has dominated them for centuries, many now feel the "Army of the whites" not only abducts their sons, but uses them and teaches them to turn against their own race.

The Guatemalan Army has long recruited its troops in a manner remini-

scent of another century. But for the first time, the Indians are beginning to act on their grudges and resentments.

In Orintepec, market women recently stoned the soldiers trying to grab their boys. In San Miguel, hundreds of men and women silently surrounded the soldiers until they agreed to withdraw.

The resistance, informed observers here believe, is part of a growing political consciousness among an Indian population where for centuries there has been no visible political movement at all. In some cases, a new militance is leading Indian groups like the Quiche, Kekchi, Mame and Cakchikel to side with anti-government organizations, including the leftist guerrillas.

In the capital, middle-class whites fear that if the Indians rise up, the conflict

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will be more bloody here than in neighboring El Salvador.

Army officers admit that the military roundups take place. However, Maj. Edgar Dominquez, an Army public relations officer, said reports about the roundups are "exaggerated, and part of the international campaign that is going on against Guatemala. The point is, military service is compulsory, and people are called in. If they don't come, they get picked up. It's the same in the United States."

In the Army, a high-ranking officer said, Indians "improve culturally and they learn how to behave like citizens." But many who work or live with the Indians here, and the Indians themselves, believe the practice is not only to fill the Army's ranks, but as a way of destroying Indian culture.

According to a priest who has long lived among them, "the Indians teach modesty, and their greatest respect is reserved for parents and elders, not for institutions. They attach a deep, mystic value to nature, life and death. Their contemplative world could not be more contrary to the defiant, macho, violent style of a Western army."

The picture that emerges from numerous interviews with Army officers, Indian parents and press-ganged boys and men, is that the Army tries to instill a blind sort of anticommunism and to alienate the conscripts from their culture with deep contempt for all that is Indian.

As former soldiers from the Quiche, Solola and Verapaz provinces told their stories, they seemed baffled and traumatized by their experiences. Most of the time, they agreed, they had been concerned with just staying alive.

"I was caught on Christmas day in San Lucas, just as I came out of church. I was just 16," said one of them. "We stayed in jail for three days. We got beaten a lot and there were so many of us, there was no room to lie down."

From San Lucas, on the shore of Lake Atitlan, trucks drove the captives to Jutiapa, a large camp in the hot lowlands near El Salvador.

Those first few months were a mixture of terror, torture and shame about being an Indian. Like the other boys, he said he had a holy respect for his parents but he heard the soldiers say constantly that his father and mother would no longer exist for him. The Army was his new father. The ones at home were ignorant, dirty brutes, he was told.

In the early hours of the morning his nightmares were often interrupted with rifle butts in the stomach, he said. "Then we had to strip naked and walk on our knees in the gravel until the skin was bleeding

and broken. If you moaned you had to do turnabouts, making the wounds worse. All the time they shouted: "You stupid Indians. You're worse than animals. You speak no Spanish, you're filthy. We'll stop you being Indians."

"One afternoon, he said, his best friend put his rifle between his knees, the muzzle under his chin. "When I heard it go off, the top of his head was gone," he said. "Another boy was kicked unconscious. A few days later he died. They told his parents he had an accident."

For the young Indians there clearly comes a breaking point at which they either try to escape, as many reportedly do, or they cross the line and eventually become capable of whatever the Army demands.

The Army now demands that the Indian troops carry the brunt of the guerrilla hunts, which includes raiding the Indian villages in areas where guerrillas operate, rounding up the men, often torturing and then shooting them.

"We were scared to death on guerrilla patrols," said one of the recruits. "During training we learned a refrain and we'd sing it on patrol. It goes, 'I am a great soldier, I hunt guerrillas. When I get them I rip their hearts out.' Shooting came easy. We were always afraid."

After 30 months in the service, the interviewed former recruits all agreed on what they had learned: to read and write and to kill.

A study by a Roman Catholic work group here concluded that at the end of the service the Indians' reactions are very mixed. Most boys have problems re-adapting to their community because of their rowdy new machismo and sense of superiority.

Some refuse to return to the drudgery and hard farmwork. Some stay in the Army, become police officers or guards.

Yet there are also growing indications that the military experience can have a politicizing affect. There is reliable evidence, although no firm figures are available, that former Indian soldiers have recently begun to join the leftist guerrillas they were taught to hunt.

The guerrillas have launched a campaign to enlist them. A booklet addressed to "the noble soldier, on ending his service" reminds the Indian of "the way you were used against the poor by the Army of the rich." In simple language, illustrated with cartoons, it calls on the soldiers to "return to your village but refuse to become the spy they ordered you to be. Help your people fight, organize."