

Guatemala Enlists Indians To Patrol Against Guerrillas

Army's Wariness in Providing Arms Suggests Unstated Goals

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SAN PEDRO JOCOPILAS, Guatemala—On the dusty field near the cemetery of ornately painted tombs, about 7,000 straw-hatted Indian peasants of Guatemala's local Civil Defense Patrols stood in ranks listening to their provincial commander, an Army colonel.

The peasants had been brought together from villages and hamlets around this small town in northern Quiche province to reinforce their solidarity with the government and to receive 30 old Mauser rifles, which were laid out on a table between them and Col. Roberto Mata, who stood on a makeshift dais speaking into a microphone about Guatemalan nationalism.

Although the peasants were part of Guatemala's long ignored and deprived Indian majority, the colonel praised them as the force that would remold Guatemala's future.

The stress Mata put on the role of the Civil Defense Patrols in preventing a return of guerrillas and in building for a better future was not just political rhetoric. In the Guatemalan Army's doctrine of counterinsurgency, the peasants armed with sticks and machetes and old rifles are at the cutting edge of the struggle.

So important are they to the Army's strategy that in the past two years, according to official figures, approximately 900,000 of this country's 7 million people have been organized into such rural patrols.

The colonel's message was one of confidence that the tide of the guerrilla war, which raged for five years across Quiche and other provinces of the nation's beautiful Indian highlands, was over. Today, because the peasants who had supported the rebels finally saw the light, "there is tranquility, confidence, work," Mata said.

Mata's theme, as at five similar rallies in other dusty towns, was straightforward: the guerrillas had "cheated" the Indians with promises they could not deliver, and it was only the Guatemalan Army—now united with the people through the Civil Defense Patrols—that could guarantee "peace and prosperity."

The message, repeated often as in an indoctrination lecture, was that the Army that they had feared

in the past was good and the "subversives" with whom many had sympathized, or served, were evil.

The duty of the patrols, Mata explained later, was twofold: to help in the defense of the Indians' villages and to provide a ready pool of manpower to help in their economic development as it is inspired by the Army. The colonel took training from U.S. Rangers before American military aid was cut off in 1977 because of this country's human rights record.

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men, Mata admitted that they are not adequate to defend their villages, and are used more as the Army's eyes and ears during their 24-hour-a-day patrols in the countryside around their communities.

Mata, who said he had 86,000 patrolmen in Quiche alone, explained the shortage of weapons in the hands of the patrolmen as the result of the Army's lack of extra guns.

Knowledgeable western military analysts said the key reason more guns are not handed out is that the Army fears they might still make their way into the hands of the guerrillas who, although greatly weakened during the past two years by relentless Army campaigns, remain in the hills of northern Guatemala.

A more important role of the Civil Defense Patrols seems to be pop-

ulation control, especially in the countryside—where four different leftist guerrilla groups have sought to wage war on the military-controlled governments of the past 30 years.

Although Mata and other Army officials insist that participation in the Civil Defense Patrols is strictly voluntary, they acknowledge that virtually all men between 18 and 55 participate because of what Mata termed "peer pressure."

Interviews with numerous patrolmen, away from the officers, indicate otherwise. "We all have to belong to the patrols," said a 30-year-old peasant who asked that his name not be used, "because if we don't, we are considered to be guerrilla sympathizers and killed."

Because the patrols put nearly every able male in a community under Army discipline, to be accounted for at all times, they provide a ready means of keeping tabs on virtually all men of fighting age in the countryside.

Many, especially in the upper reaches of the highlands, have spent years among the guerrillas, often forced to live with their families among them because Army sweeps had burned their villages. As a result, most of the patrolmen are still considered suspect by the Army that officially sings their praises.

"Rarely have they [the patrolmen] had to defend themselves," Mata said during an interview at his headquarters near here, "because there are no guerrillas to defend against. They were the guerrillas." He then modified his words, saying it was an overstatement. But there is little doubt that many of the civil patrolmen in Quiche have served with the guerrillas—if not as fighters, then as support personnel growing the rebels' food and providing logistic help.

Army campaigns in the mountains in the past two years, the privations of living in the rugged land, and the guerrillas' increasingly harsh methods of discipline have brought many back to their traditional areas—where the Army has organized them into the patrols.

The patrolmen, usually wearing camouflage-painted straw hats, guard the roads, patrol villages, act as informers for the government and, when ordered to do so, serve

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the Army or their communities as a manpower reserve. Their work can include clearing fields for military outposts, repairing rain-damaged roads and helping build "model villages" going up on the ruins of previously razed villages.

According to Mata and other officials, patrolmen devote one or two 24-hour days to the patrols each week. The labor is indeed voluntary in the sense that the men receive no pay. Many complain in private that it takes them away from trying to grow food to feed their often destitute families.

The Indians, all of Mayan descent, tend to accept the demands the Army has placed on them, just as they accepted those of the guerrillas when they were the dominant military force in the region.

Indians have suffered thousands of dead in the guerrilla wars. Amnesty International speaks of tens of thousands in the past five years.

"The Indians have always just wanted to be left alone," said a Guatemalan sociologist in the capital, asking that his name not be used. "They know if they don't do what they are told they will be killed, so they do what they are told because the thing they want to do most is to survive."

Doing so is not that easy. Even being in the Civil Defense Patrols is no guarantee of safety, according to the men who serve.

Talking to a visitor out of earshot of the plainclothes Army civil-action teams that organized their ranks, many of the patrolmen spoke of fear of the guerrillas with whom they once lived.

"The Army did not want us to be in the mountains, and now the guerrillas don't want us to be here among the Army," said a grizzled 35-year-old from a nearby hamlet. "If we try to leave here, the Army will kill us. But by staying, we are often attacked by the guerrillas who don't want us here."

Diplomats and Guatemalan analysts who try to keep tabs on the violence that still wracks this volcanic land speak of hundreds of scarcely armed civil patrolmen killed in the past year by guerrillas they have run up against.

That fear explained the prevalence of signs held above the ranks here asking for the Constituent Assembly working on a new constitution in Guatemala City to legalize the Civil Defense Patrols and "provide us with arms."

That, as Mata and other Army officials here explain, is not likely to happen. The weapons finally handed out here, the 30 old bolt-action Mausers, were more symbolic than significant.

Although the Civil Defense Patrols now number just under 1 million men and are touted as the true defense against a guerrilla resurgence, the Guatemalan Army has made it clear that real security still lies solely with the Army.