

# Guatemalan Indians Say Their Lot Has Worsened Since Coup

By Loren Jenkins  
Washington Post Foreign Service

**HUEHUETENANGO, Guatemala**—In a rocky gorge that bisects the Pan American highway nine miles south of this provincial capital, silver-painted bridge lies crumpled in brown river water.

"This is the way subversive elements contribute to the progress of our nation," reads the sign painted on the bridge's foundation as a note to travelers along the potholed detour. Leftist guerrillas have been harrying on Guatemala's succession of military governments for the better part of two decades.

Down the road, past a temporary bridge erected to keep traffic flowing, a band of civilians armed with rifles manned a roadblock making identity checks. Their presence underlined that although the bridge had dynamited two years ago at a high point of the guerrilla activity, the war in the scrubby hills that rise beyond it continues.

Indeed, here in the Indian highlands of northern Guatemala the guerrilla war that has simmered

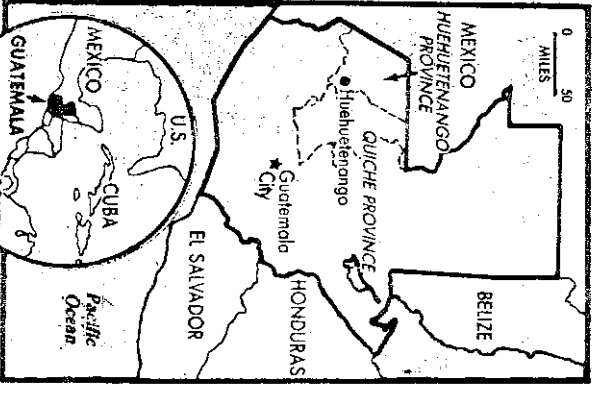
largely without including the impoverished Indians—about half of Guatemala's 7 million people—is showing signs of heating up after a relatively quiet period.

A week ago, in neighboring Quiché province, five Army engineers were killed when their truck ran over a claymore mine. That same week, 22 villagers in another part of the province were reported to have been killed. Accounts conflicted on whose side the victims served.

Daily reports describe kidnappings, isolated shootouts in the hills, and bodies, often burned and mutilated, found along the roadside.

Military checkpoints—or those maintained by civilian defense forces under Army command—have multiplied. Leaders of some of the 23 Indian tribes—for whose hearts and minds both the Army and the guerrillas vie—report a resurgence of Army retaliations against villages suspected of harboring or supporting guerrillas.

"Our people are once again being forced to flee their villages into the mountains to save their lives," an



By Dave Cook—The Washington Post

Indian leaders and other worried Guatemalans interviewed in a week-long trip to northern Guatemala pegged the revival of the conflict in the countryside to the Aug. 8 palace coup by Defense Minister Oscar Mejia Victores against Gen. Efraim Rios Montt, the fundamentalist lay preacher who had himself come to power in an Army coup 16 months earlier.

Although Rios Montt's rule was criticized, he is widely credited with having managed to contain the guerrilla war by luring or forcing the Indians to rally to the side of the Army.

Adopting a tactic he labeled *frijoles y fusiles* ("beans and guns"), Rios Montt sought to isolate the guerrillas by offering the impoverished and neglected Indians food handouts and work and providing arms for them to form civil defense units under Army control.

Although initially Rios Montt's policy relied more on the *fusiles* than *frijoles*, he gave the Indians a powerful voice on his advisory Coun-

cil of State. These efforts isolated the guerrillas from the Indians.

Under the civil defense program, young males—often under the threat of being considered subversives themselves—joined in patrolling their districts under Army command. These units, which now include half a million Indians, provided the Army with eyes and ears in the countryside. The vast pool of men might otherwise have been lured to the side of the guerrillas.

The result was to deprive the guerrillas of even the tacit support of the Indian communities on whom they partly relied for food, intelligence and new recruits.

"Our people basically are neutral in the conflict," said a leader of the Rabinal Achi tribe who asked that his name not be used. "They basically just want to be left alone because they know if they side with the subversives they will be eliminated by the Army, or if they side with the Army they will be eliminated by the subversives."

Under Rios Montt, the tribal leader said, it became prudent to side

with the government because it had the upper hand and was, for the first time in Guatemalan history, offering the possibility that the voice of the Indian majority would be heard by the Latin minority ruling in the capital.

But the Indian leaders interviewed said that since Gen. Mejia came to power in August, the situation in their mountainous homelands had changed for the worse.

Despite governmental claims that an amnesty offer had brought hundreds of guerrillas to the government side, and led 12,000 displaced Indians in the mountains to return to their villages, Indian leaders insisted their people were frightened of the Army under Gen. Mejia and were taking to the hills.

Reports that Gen. Mejia planned to dissolve the Council of State added to the disquiet.

"Things are getting worse, not better," said a young leader of the Mam tribe from the central highlands. "We thought that after centuries we were about to be treated as human

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