

Speech given by Mrs. Shirley Fuentes Mohr at the IUF-HRC Workers' Trade Group Conference, Geneva, December 4-7, 1979

Guatemala's geographical position, in addition to its Indian heritage, has had an important effect on the development of the tourist industry in this country. Placed in Central America, neighbouring with Mexico, and a two-hour flight away from Miami, Florida; Guatemala is placed in an ideal setting and has close connecting flights to most North American and major European cities.

Nevertheless, and in spite of its rich archaeological sites, strong Indian culture, beautiful scenery and climate, tourism is on the wane in Guatemala. Very gradually international public opinion is becoming aware of the ferocious repression and total insecurity which exist in Guatemala and which are worsening steadily as time goes on.

The origins of this inhuman and unbelievable state of affairs, for people who have not been in Guatemala, can be found in the acute economic inequalities and poverty that exist in spite of the abundance of fertile land and natural resources. About 75% of Guatemala's population depends directly on the agricultural sector, yet two-thirds of the land is in the hands of 2% of the landlords. Although 80% of children suffer from malnutrition, the most productive lands are used to produce export crops, such as coffee, cotton, sugar and bananas, exclusively controlled by a limited number of traditionally wealthy families or by foreign companies (i.e., Del Monte). The industrial sector consists mostly of traditional light industries producing textiles, clothes, processed foodstuffs and plastic products, several of them controlled by transnational enterprises (e.g., Nestlé, Duralita (Eternit)). The tourist sector, the second largest source of income and foreign exchange, largely benefits foreign hotels and a limited number of members of the upper-middle class.

In order to maintain their privileges, the dominant sectors of Guatemalan society have increasingly relied on the Army, in spite of mounting popular opposition. As a result, and partly in payment of its services, the Army's highly placed officials have moved into business, agriculture, industry and services, often displacing the traditional families who had previously predominated in the Guatemalan economy. As a consequence, the Army now defends not only the interests of the richest sector of Guatemalan society, but its own interests as well, repressing any movement or organization which threatens them.

Guatemala has been living under a clear military dictatorship since 1970. Even before 1970, the Army had already begun to have a predominant role in politics in the late 1960's, massacring hundreds of Guatemalans in order to destroy a small guerilla group. Amnesty International has estimated that from 1966 to 1976, those that have died at the hands of para-military death squads could number as high as 20,000.

As of 1970, Guatemala has had three generals as presidents. All three have been supposedly "elected" through obvious frauds. The repression and institutionalized violence which they have promoted has had its ups and downs and has reached a climax since the last president General Romeo Lucas came into power in July, 1978. Approximately 2,000 people have been killed since then, many after being imprisoned and tortured by para-military death squads or directly by the army.

Amnesty International has a large number of documents which show how any organization which could be conceived as a democratic alternative to the present dictatorial regime has been hit. Practically all visible leaders of labour unions, peasant organizations, political opposition parties and school and university student associations have been assassinated or forced into exile. These assassinations have often taken place in broad daylight in the most important sectors of the city. The Secretary General of the National University Students' Association, Olivero Castaneda, a brilliant student in economics, 23 years old, was assassinated at noon, one-half block away from the Central Park and the National Government Palace, in front of national policemen who totally ignored what had gone on. Two persons who happened to be there were wounded. My husband, Alberto Fuentes Mohr, founder and leader of the Democratic Socialist Party, was assassinated at half-past one in the afternoon in one of the main avenues in Guatemala City when traffic was at its heaviest, and one block away from one of the main military bases in the city. Manuel Colom Argueta, head of the United Revolutionary Front, the only other legal party which, together with the Democratic Socialist Party, was in opposition to the Government, was assassinated at 11:00 in the morning, a few blocks away from where my husband had been killed. Colom Argueta was assassinated with two bodyguards while an Army helicopter flew over the scene to insure the success of the operation.

These are only some of the most evident acts of violence committed against certain organizations. The labour movement has particularly suffered from a long and continuous repression. Although the Constitution theoretically allows the organization of labour unions, there has been a systematic campaign to destroy them. This has been attempted through massive sacking of workers and the assassination and torture of the most prominent labour leaders. This repression has also been extended to labour lawyers who have been assassinated as well. José Alberto Alvarado, leader of the National Confederation of Workers' (CNT), was assassinated on June 29, 1978; Mario Rolando Mujia, labour lawyer of the miners in the Northwest of Guatemala, was shot on July 20, 1978. An assistant of Mujia, Maria Eugenia Mendoza, was kidnapped and tortured on September 5; Miguel Angel Ordonez, worker of the largest glass company in Guatemala was shot and killed by police on October 5; Arnulfo Cifuentes Diaz, former president and one of the main leaders of the Association of Telegraphists and Radio-Telegraphists, was murdered on October 7; Marco Antonio Hernandez, director of the State Employees' Union, was arrested on the 11th of October, and four more workers of the same union were arrested in the following days. This is only part of the repression against workers which continues to this day.

On October 16, there was an attempt on the life of Israel Marquez, Secretary General of the National Committee of United Workers (CNUS) and an organizer of the union in the Coca-Cola bottling plant. The case of the Coca-Cola plant in Guatemala, as you may know, is particularly gruesome. Apart from massive sacking and apparent reorganizations of the firm in order to destroy the union, Pedro Quevedo, former Secretary General of the union, was assassinated on December 12, 1978. On January 24, 1979, there was a second attempt on Israel Marquez's life, but another person was killed by mistake. This time, Marquez sought exile in the Venezuelan embassy. On April 5, 1979, Manuel Lopez Balan, Secretary General of the Coca-Cola Union, was assassinated, and Rafael Gonzalez and Silverio Vasquez, also workers of Coca-Cola Company, were kidnapped and shot at, respectively, in June.

Peasants have also suffered a similar fate, the most notorious case being the mass assassination of over 100 Kekchi Indians by the army on the 29th of May of last year. The Indians had come to the town to discuss a dispute over land which they had farmed for several generations. Following the killings, Army spokesmen claimed that it was the campesinos who initiated the violence, but reliable church, university, peasant, labour and legal organizations within Guatemala maintain that it was the Army that opened fire.

The assassination, torture and kidnappings of peasants has continued, a recent case being the disappearance of nine peasants in Northern Guatemala in October of this year.

Children have not been spared. On the 15th of March of this year, for instance, Sonia Isabel Oliva, Secretary General of a textile union was kidnapped along with her two-year old son. Her kidnappers threatened to torture her son while they interrogated her. One month ago, Yolanda Aguilar and Freddy Valente, 16 and 17 years old, respectively, were kidnapped at the Palace of the Court of Justice itself. Both were tortured and Yolanda Aguilar was kicked and hit by the Chief of Detectives himself, and later raped. Their lives were miraculously saved because a journalist took a picture when they were in a police bus as they were being taken away. The photograph was published and it was only then that the police felt they had to release the prisoners.

Lately, not surprisingly, journalists have been the most recent victims. Jose Leon Castaneda, one of the leaders and founder of the Union of the Communication Media, was assassinated on November 16. Two more journalists were kidnapped later and they both appeared seriously tortured and are still between life and death at a local hospital.

The repression and violation of human rights has had the effect of strengthening and promoting guerrilla activity, which is probably stronger now than ever before in Guatemala, leading to even greater uncertainty and to a general climate of even greater insecurity and fear. The archaeological sites are, now and then, the scene of guerrilla activity. The Indian population, traditionally considered passive and a source of tourist folklore is now awakening and demanding its rights.

Furthermore, in the face of growing popular opposition to the regime, the government and Army do not hesitate to increase repression. The tourist sector and foreign tourists have already been affected by this wave of violence. On December 6 of last year, two labour leaders of the Camino Real Hotel, part of the Biltmore Hotels branch, were arrested as they presented a labour claim to the Labour Inspector's Office. During the following days, three more workers from the hotel were arrested and, as a result of these threats, the hotel workers were not able to form a union.

Foreign tourists themselves have not been exempted from rampant violence in Guatemala. On the last days of October of this year, two tourists - one Japanese and another French - were killed and another, a Canadian tourist, was seriously wounded, while visiting El Quiche, an area densely populated by Indians, and where guerrilla activities abound and army counterinsurgency operations often take place.

In spite of this general climate of repression and violence, tourists continue to go to Guatemala, as a result of the lack of information concerning the situation there. A tourist boycott would be an effective instrument not only to guarantee the personal security of tourists, but would also serve as a means of putting pressure on the government until the full exercise of human and trade union rights has been established in Guatemala.