

Denounced Abroad, Guatemalan

By Douglas Farah
Washington Post Foreign Service

GUATEMALA CITY—Whether Guatemalans view retired general Efraim Rios Montt as hero or war criminal, they agree he is the man to beat in this year's presidential election.

Despite having presided over one of the blackest human rights chapters in the country's bloody history, Rios Montt, an unabashed born-again Christian who became known for ruthless tactics against a leftist, largely Indian guerrilla movement, has re-emerged as a national leader just as the Guatemalan military's human rights record again comes under intense U.S. scrutiny.

Human rights groups charge that the 14 months in which Rios Montt was military president of Guatemala, beginning in June 1982, occurred at the height of the army's "scorched earth" policy against a leftist insurgency, in which tens of thousands were killed and thousands forcibly relocated.

His election could add fuel to demands in Washington that the United States review past support of the Guatemalan army, some of whose senior officers have been accused of involvement in human rights abuses affecting U.S. citizens.

Rep. Robert G. Torricelli (D-N.J.) last month linked senior Guatemalan officers, including one who was on the CIA payroll as an informant, to the 1990 killing of Michael DeVine, a U.S. citizen who ran a remote inn. The officer, Col. Julio Alpirez, also was linked to the death of Efraim Bamaca, a leftist guerrilla leader who was married to an American lawyer.

As a result, an investigation is underway in Washington into Pentagon and CIA relations with Alpirez and others in the Guatemalan military.

Rios Montt, 68, largely has been shunned by U.S. and other diplomats here. He is excluded from as many social events as possible, despite his being president of the Congress.

Nevertheless, Rios Montt is on the comeback trail among Guatemalans who long for law-and-order leadership. His ascension to president of the Congress in January was seen as a key move to contest in the presidential election in November or December.

"Some despise him and some love him, but in the end, he is on everybody's mind," said political analyst Miguel Balcarcel.

Ex-General Targets

Presidency

"That is reality, and you cannot deny his charisma, whether you like him or not."

Rios Montt's supporters see the general as an officer of personal integrity in an institution riddled with corruption and credit him with effectively defeating the guerrillas militarily. And they say that what Guatemala needs now, facing a crime wave and political uncertainty, is a leader willing to impose order.

President Ramiro de Leon Carpio, who took office in June 1993 when president Jorge Serrano and part of the military tried to seize decree powers, is widely viewed as weak and indecisive. Serrano's predecessor, Vinicio Cerezo, was a democrat whose presidency was widely viewed as a failure.

"Rios Montt appeals to people's fear of ungovernability, the sense that everything is going down the sink," said Frank LaRue of the Center for Human Rights Legal Action. "People want to believe in law and or-

der in the world. That is how [Adolf] Hitler got elected."

With a well-financed, nationally organized party, the Guatemalan Republican Front, Rios Montt faces little serious competition in a country where politicians across the spectrum bemoan a serious leadership vacuum. In a poll last month by the Siglo XXI newspaper, 48 percent of the decided voters favored Rios Montt, more than 20 points ahead of anyone else.

As president, Rios Montt was instrumental in forming the notorious Civilian Self-Defense Patrols, groups of armed peasants tied to the army who have been linked to some of the nation's worst human rights abuses. The groups were a key part of his "rifles and beans" campaign aimed at wiping out civilian support for Marxist rebels who have fought a sputtering insurgency for 34 years. Despite pleas from the United Nations and human rights organizations, the patrols remain entrenched.



BY NANCY MCGIRR FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Retired general Efraim Rios Montt, who was president for 14 months after a coup, says Bible should be Guatemala's operating manual.

Rios Montt also set up secret military courts that tried suspected guerrillas without appeal, empowered to carry out the death sentence. In a 1990 interview, he acknowledged that 15 of the 700 to 800 people brought before the courts were executed. He was ousted in a military coup in 1983.

International human rights organizations estimate that 100,000 people have died in political violence in Guatemala over the last 20 years, and another 40,000 have "disappeared." One of the best-documented massacres, where 200 men, women and children were killed by army troops in the central hamlet of Plan de Sanchez, occurred during Rios Montt's tenure. The remains of those killed for suspected support of leftist guerrillas were exhumed last year, and survivors are pressing for a legal investigation.

Balcarcel, who does not support Rios Montt, said one had to look at the context

of his term in office: "With or without Rios Montt, you could not stop the dynamic of the war quickly at that juncture, on either side. The guerrillas were a significant presence, and he defeated them. There was a great deal of pain on both sides."

The ex-general, after presiding over a marathon session of Congress, hustled into an interview, apologizing for the delay and launching into a defense of his record. He dismissed concerns about his human rights record, saying he was the one who set Guatemala on the path toward democratization.

"I can only tell you that I never gave an order in my life that went against the law," Rios Montt said. "I do not know everything that happened. Can one say President Clinton is responsible for the Oklahoma bomb because he is president?"

The constitution bans those who participated in military coups from seeking the presidency, as well as "ministers of a religion or sect," provisions that kept Rios

Montt from running in 1990. In addition to heading a military government that arose from a coup, he is a minister in El Verbo church, affiliated with Gospel Outreach Church of Eureka, Calif.

But Rios Montt is working to change the constitution or change the supreme electoral council's interpretation of it. Many analysts here believe he will find a way onto the ballot, especially now that he holds a high elected office.

"The law was subjective, made to keep me from running, and that is not just," said Rios Montt. "You reap what you sow. They sowed illegality by not letting me run [in 1990] and they are reaping the crisis today."

Rios Montt advocates the death penalty for murderers and rapists, and he defined freedom as "doing what one ought to do, not what one wants to do."

Folksy and dynamic in public, he calls the Bible the "manual for how human beings should operate, just like cars come with manuals on how to operate them." He said he gave weekly televised sermons as president not to impose his religious views but to try to strengthen family values in a country plagued by immorality.

Asked about his social and economic program, Rios Montt replied, "morality in the state and personal integrity. That is enough. Everything else follows that."