

In Washington

Covert Aid Undermined Public Outrage

By R. Jeffrey Smith and Dana Priest
Washington Post Staff Writers

Revelations about a CIA informer linked to two murders in Guatemala have helped exhume an embarrassing relationship between U.S. military and intelligence personnel and a Central American regime that is notorious for its human rights violations.

While U.S. public attention was largely distracted by civil wars in neighboring El Salvador and Nicaragua, the CIA and U.S. military trained and equipped anti-communist military forces widely believed to have killed more than 100,000 peasants during a decades-long simmering insurgency, according to U.S. intelligence, military, and diplomatic officials.

On several occasions, U.S. presidents, Congress and U.S. diplomats tried to pressure the Guatemalan military to respect human rights. But this message was repeatedly undercut by the secret relationship between U.S. and Guatemalan intelligence and military officials, which persisted even while Washington was publicly scaling

back its ties, U.S. officials and former diplomats now say.

"This has got roots that are very, very deep in terms of how the [CIA] station chiefs viewed their roles in the country," said a retired senior military official, who requested anonymity when speaking about covert activities in Guatemala that other officials said were conducted with secret approval from at least six U.S. presidents.

"It created a real dilemma for fair-minded Guatemalan officers" who saw their colleagues continue to receive U.S. payments for information on leftist insurgents and drug traffickers, the official said. "It's difficult for the U.S. to say, on the one hand, you've got to promote democracy, stop corruption, not be venal, [while] . . . at the same time, on the surreptitious side, we're doing exactly the opposite."

"The situation just got out of control in Guatemala," he added, "and it's been out of control for a long time."

A rare public hearing on the intelligence community's role in Guatemala is scheduled for Wednesday, when

See CIA, A30, Col. 1

acting CIA director William Studeman and the American spouse of a murdered Guatemalan guerrilla fighter are to appear before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

President Clinton ordered a government-wide investigation of U.S. policy in Guatemala last week, after a congressman disclosed CIA ties to a Guatemalan army colonel, Julio Roberto Alpirez, who other CIA informants have linked to the killings of the guerrilla and of a rural innkeeper who was a U.S. citizen. A CIA informer from around 1988 to 1992, Alpirez received a CIA cash payment even after his links to the first of these murders became known to the agency.

The probe includes separate investigations by the Justice Department and FBI into an anonymous tip—which has not been substantiated—that U.S. documents relevant to the murders were being destroyed. On Friday the Pentagon also launched a comprehensive inquiry into its own activities in Guatemala as far back as the 1980s, including all of its military intelligence and counter-narcotics operations there.

What sparked "the rainstorm," as Pentagon spokesman Kenneth H. Bacon described it, was the persistence of one American, Jennifer Harbury, a lawyer who refused to believe U.S. officials when they told her they had no conclusive evidence about the disappearance of her Guatemalan husband, guerrilla fighter Efraim Bamaca Velazquez.

Harbury learned about the CIA connection to Alpirez two weeks ago from Rep. Robert G. Torricelli (D-N.J.), and her success has provoked similar protests from more than two dozen other Americans who say they were beaten by Guatemalan military or paramilitary personnel, or have U.S. relatives who were murdered or abused there.

Besides Michael DeVine, the innkeeper slain and nearly decapitated in 1990, the victims include Dianne Ortiz, an Ursuline sister who was tortured and gang raped in 1989; Nicholas Blake, a journalist killed by Guatemalan paramilitary troops in 1985; and several human rights advocates, priests and nuns, a Peace Corps volunteer and others working with the poor who were killed.

"I don't need to know how they

know, I just want to know what they know," said Samuel Blake, a Pentagon consultant who helped excavate his brother's remains in the Guatemalan highlands in 1992.

The CIA's role in Guatemala may have been covert, but there was nothing subtle about its impact.

In 1954, the agency helped orchestrate the overthrow of the elected government of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman to halt socialist reforms and protect the interests of a major U.S. corporation, United Fruit. Those who were

deposed in the coup went on to help form the guerrilla movement that the government, with backing from the CIA, is still fighting today.

Washington often behaved like a colonial power in its dealings with the country. Six years after the coup, for example, another Guatemalan strongman, Ydigoras Fuentes, was pressured into allowing the training of Cuban exiles for the ill-fated CIA-led Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba.

That decision helped spark nationalist opposition to the government. But Washington ensured the survival of a sympathetic leadership by providing the country with \$240 million in U.S. assistance from 1962 to 1976. It was during this period that Washington greatly expanded its intelligence contacts and military training in Guatemala, and also when the death squads grew more powerful.

Pierro Gleijeses, a professor of foreign policy at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, said that CIA reports from the late 1960s that he has read reflect detailed knowledge about the activities of the Guatemalan death squads.

"Either they were directly involved or they were very close" to death squad members, said Gleijeses, who has written a book about the 1954 CIA-sponsored coup. He adds that during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the Guatemalan military nearly extinguished the insurgency, "there is absolutely no question" that U.S. military special forces troops were providing assistance.

In forging close intelligence ties, Washington had no choice but to turn to corrupt and often brutal Guatemalan military officers, according to Richard Millett, a senior research associate at the University of Miami's

North-South Center. "Unfortunately, we don't ask ourselves what the nature of this counterpart is, and although they have the same functions, they don't have the same values," he said.

Abuses occurred throughout the 1970s but it was not until 1977 that Washington's public relationship was severely strained by a damning human rights report. Congress threatened to cut off military aid but the insular Guatemalan leadership rejected \$2.1 million in the pipeline and death squads got what U.S. diplomats now say was a much freer hand.

Relations began to improve dramatically in the early 1980s with the Reagan administration's effort to unseat a leftist government in Nicaragua and to help defeat Marxist guerrillas in El Salvador. Guatemala—the most populous country in Central America—was regarded as a staging ground for U.S. aid to counterinsurgency operations elsewhere in the region.

Guatemalan military officials provided dozens of bogus shipping documents that enabled U.S. arms brokers to ship \$8 million in Portuguese arms and ammunition to the Nicaraguan an-

ti-leftist rebels called contras. In March 1985, Iran-contra figure Oliver L. North advocated that Guatemala be monetarily rewarded "for the extraordinary assistance they are providing" the Nicaraguan fighters, according to a document obtained by the National Security Archives.

During this period, U.S. officials said, Guatemala's human rights abuses were among the most odious in Central America. Police methods, according to State Department human rights reports, included rape, beatings, cigarette burns and many other forms of torture or mutilation. Many of those who protested the abuses were kidnapped and shot; those who informed on the slayings frequently disappeared.

Washington viewed the evidence of such atrocities through a prism tinged by the Cold War. The victims of the abuses in 1987 were depicted in a State Department human rights report chiefly as criminals or Marxists; not until 1995 were they said to include many citizens spuriously charged with leftist sympathies.

"We were not very squeamish," said

a senior official who helped direct robust U.S. anti-drug and counterinsurgency efforts in the region. Between 1986 and 1990, Washington provided a total of \$30 million in military assistance to Guatemala and nearly \$700 million in economic assistance.

"It's easy to look back now and say these bastards [the insurgency] never really had a chance," said Thomas Strook, U.S. ambassador to Guatemala from 1989 to 1992. "But it wasn't easy to see it then" because of Washington's exaggerated anxieties about a Marxist-led triumph.

When Washington in 1990 cut off \$7 million in military assistance in response to the DeVine slaying, U.S. military officers at the embassy had difficulty "accepting that the Guatemalan Army killed DeVine, and that we weren't going to have much to do with them" anymore, Strook said.

In fact, Washington maintained its intelligence contacts, continued development and food aid, allowed some commercial sales of military equipment, and substantially boosted covert spending for anti-drug efforts. "On Monday, we'd say, 'protect human rights, and who killed DeVine?' On Tuesday, we'd say, 'we need to conduct this flight to eradicate some poppies,'" said a source familiar with the program.

In 1994, the Clinton administration ended the presidential finding authorizing a CIA covert program in Guatemala. In February 1995, after questions were revived about Alpirez, the CIA station chief in Guatemala was recalled to Washington.

Staff Researcher Roland Matijas contributed to this report.
