

Post 11/28/93

THE WASHI

# Death Squad Debris

## Honduras Struggles With the Legacy of CIA-Trained Rights Abusers

By Anne Manuel

**T**HE LEGACY of a CIA-trained death squad has been one of the vexing and painful issues of the recent presidential campaign in Honduras. In the early 1980s, Battalion 3-16, a Honduran military unit whose members were instructed by and worked with CIA officials, "disappeared" scores of leftist activists—students, teachers, unionists and would-be guerrillas—who were never seen again, dead or alive. But with the Cold War over, Honduras is no longer in the forefront of the U.S. offensive against leftist forces in Central America. As Washington loses interest in this poor, agricultural republic, its 4.8 million people are left to cope with the consequences.

Today, Hondurans will choose between two presidential candidates who have traded insults over each other's alleged connections to Battalion 3-16. The death squad issue was injected into the campaign by the families of the victims and human rights groups, hoping for an official investigation to account for the disappeared as did the Truth Commission of neighboring El Salvador. As in El Salvador, much remains untold about the American connection to deadly repression.

The nightmare began for Honduras in August 1980. Twenty-five Honduran army officers were flown from Central America to a desert air strip in the southwestern United States, according to the sworn testimony in international court of one Honduran intelligence officer who participated. They spent six months learning interrogation techniques from a team of CIA and FBI trainers. Florencio Caballero, the Honduran officer, says that the U.S. instructors taught different methods of eliciting information from uncooperative prisoners without resorting to violence.

When the officers returned to Honduras, the courses continued. The American trainers were joined

by instructors fresh from the "dirty wars" in Argentina and Chile in which thousands of suspected leftists were abducted and executed by security forces. These sessions, according to Caballero, focused on surveillance and techniques for following suspects and rescuing kidnap victims. This group of officers went on to become a secret division of Honduran military intelligence known as Battalion 3-16.

**T**hat Battalion 3-16 engaged in a systematic program of disappearances and political murder from 1981 to 1984 is beyond question. In 1981, the U.S. State Department, in its annual report on human rights practices, noted some 60 "mysterious" disappearances in Honduras, whereas none was reported in previous years. By March 1984, 100-150 students, teachers, unionists and travelers had been picked up and secretly executed by plainclothes squads. These squads, according to a judgment of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights issued in July 1988, belonged to Battalion 3-16.

The court's decision was a milestone in international law. It originated with the families of two vic-

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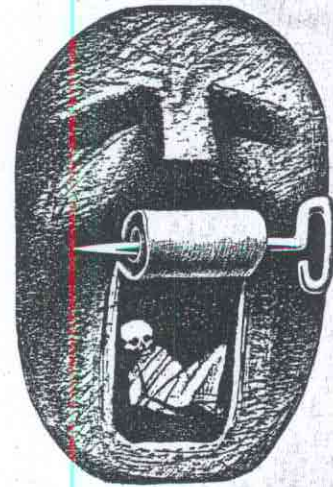
tims, teacher Saul Godinez and student Angel Manfredo Velasquez Rodriguez. Frustrated in their efforts to locate the two men through the legal system in Honduras, their families went to the Organization of American States. The result was an unprecedented three-year trial before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in Costa Rica in which Battalion 3-16's murderous practices were exposed.

Caballero and other witnesses de-

scribed the squad's modus operandi: weeks of surveillance followed by capture by disguised agents using vehicles with stolen license plates (in a few scuffles, Caballero told the court, his colleagues lost their wigs and moustaches). Interrogation and torture in clandestine jails were usually followed by execution and secret burial.

At one point, court president Thomas Buergenthal, a law professor at George Washington University, asked Caballero about the attitude of Battalion 3-16 officers towards Honduran judges who sought to establish the whereabouts of the disappeared.

"The group made fun of what was being said outside," Caballero replied. "They said they [the judges] are stupid. Why are they asking for



BY IGOR KOPELNIISKY FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

this one, when this one will never return?"

The trial did not dwell on the American role, if any, in the terror. But the CIA's intimate connection with Battalion 3-16 was later confirmed by Gen. Gustavo Alvarez Martinez, who created and com-

manded the death squad from 1980, when he became chief of the national police force, through 1984, when he was serving as chief of the Honduran armed forces.

"The CIA trained my people in intelligence," Alvarez told a Reuters reporter years later. "They gave very good training, especially in interrogation." Alvarez said the agency provided his men with lie detectors, phone-tapping devices and electronic equipment to analyze intelligence data.

According to Florencio Caballero, the CIA trainers explicitly rejected violent coercion. But he said that the CIA operatives working with Battalion 3-16 were informed when suspected leftists were abducted. The Hondurans felt compelled—like poor students cheating on an exam—to deceive their sponsors about the fate of the victims, Caballero says. When bodies were found, the Hondurans would tell the Americans they had freed their detain-

ees, and that they were subsequently killed by guerrillas for having given information during their captivity.

"The CIA had nothing to do with picking people up," one American official told the New York Times, "but they knew about it and when some people disappeared, they looked the other way."

U.S. officials, meanwhile, continued to deny that there were abuses by the Honduran military. Nonetheless, U.S. officials attacked the credibility of those who denounced the Honduran military's abuses. "It is simply untrue to state that death squads have made their appearance in Honduras," U.S. Ambassador John Negroponte wrote in the *Economist* in 1982. At the same time, the State Department was attacking the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in Honduras, the group that did the most to expose Battalion 3-16. The commission was repeatedly denounced by the State Department as "communist," "anti-democratic" and, ironically, as a terrorist front group.

**I**n 1984 a rival general, acting partly out of revulsion against Battalion 3-16's atrocities, deposed Gen. Alvarez in a barracks coup. Forced into exile in Miami, Alvarez quickly landed a consulting job with

the Pentagon. He was paid a \$400 a day stipend for writing a classified report on "low-intensity conflict."

The number of disappearances declined sharply after Alvarez's ouster in 1984. In 1988, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights found Honduras responsible for the pattern of disappearances that claimed the lives of Saul Godinez and Angel Manfredo Velasquez Rodriguez. Ordered to pay damages to their relatives, the government complied only partially. Meanwhile, the officers who commanded Battalion 3-16 continue to occupy positions of power in Honduras to this day. Gen. Luis Alonso Discua, who participated in Battalion 3-16, according to U.S. and Honduran officials, is now the chief of the armed forces.

In this year's presidential campaign, the two leading candidates have mostly used the Battalion 3-16 issue to tar each other. Oswaldo Ramos Soto of the National Party notes that the Liberal Party was in power during the death squad's most active years. The campaign of Carlos Roberto Reina, Liberal candidate, has replied that Ramos Soto was the rector of the national university at the time that Battalion 3-16 kidnapped several students, implying (without evidence) that Ramos Soto was complicit in the repression. An independent government minister has offered to produce a preliminary report by the end of the year on the disappeared. It will be the first serious effort at telling the truth about the Honduran side of these bloody events.

But because of the veil of secrecy surrounding all CIA activities, the U.S. government's role in Battalion 3-16 has never been fully explained. A congressional intelligence committee looked into the CIA's sponsorship of Battalion 3-16 in 1988, but its findings were never made public. That the U.S. officials who turned a blind eye to crimes committed by their clients have never been questioned is bad enough. Worse, the absence of any public accountability for such CIA covert operations leaves no guarantee that it won't happen again.