

Panel Faults CIA Actions In Guatemala

Human Rights Record Called 'Unacceptable'

6/29/96

By R. Jeffrey Smith
Washington Post Staff Writer

A presidential advisory panel disclosed yesterday that the CIA employed multiple informants in the Guatemalan government and military forces over the past decade who agency officials knew were involved in assassinations, torture, kidnappings and murders in that country.

The Intelligence Oversight Board also concluded that CIA officials wrongfully kept information about these crimes and other human rights abuses committed by their paid Guatemalan informants from Congress, committing a violation of U.S. law that continued until late 1994.

The board did not identify the informants, whom the CIA paid while providing extensive assistance to Guatemalan military operations against peasant guerrillas from 1984 to the early 1990s.

The board declined to accuse any individuals at the CIA of deliberate deception or criminal wrongdoing. It blamed instead a systematic failure by the agency to pay heed to the issue of human rights in its foreign operations until 1994. At that time, abuses by a paid CIA informant in another Central American country, El Salvador, provoked a broad CIA investigation and a damning internal report on the behavior of many of its human "assets," or informants, in the region.

None of the questionable informants remains on the CIA's payroll.

See GUATEMALA, A24, Col. 1

GUATEMALA, From A1

but only one was dropped because of involvement in human rights abuses, according to the board.

The board's report resulted from a 15-month investigation and grew out of public allegations by Rep. Robert G. Torricelli (D-N.J.) last year that the CIA had on its payroll a Guatemalan military officer who was linked to the murders of an American innkeeper, Michael DeVine, and a Guatemalan guerrilla married to U.S. citizen Jennifer Harbury.

Asked to comment yesterday, Torricelli said the report should have expressed "a greater level of outrage at the fact that American taxpayer money was used by the CIA to pay Guatemalans who murdered, tortured, and then covered up their crimes." Harbury said she welcomed the report's disclosures about scurrilous activity by CIA contacts and its failures to inform Congress, but disagreed with some of its findings regarding her husband's death. She promised to say more at a later time.

The board, which had wide-ranging access to classified documents at the CIA, the Pentagon, the State Department and the National Security Agency, bluntly called the CIA's performance on human rights issues during the period in question "unacceptable," even though Guatemala has long been notorious for lawlessness and violence.

But the board's report, which was presented in classified form to President Clinton on Monday, also complimented a series of reforms instituted early this year by CIA director John M. Deutch to correct some of the agency's mistakes. It included a new directive generally barring the recruitment of unsavory informants except when senior CIA officials decide their assistance is warranted by national interests.

White House officials said yesterday that they approved of the report's conclusions, including its recommendation that Clinton take other steps to correct a series of lesser errors in Guatemala. The board called, for example, for a new agreement between the State Department and the CIA to ensure that U.S. ambassadors are kept abreast of important CIA activities overseas.

Drawing on what it described as an almost inexplicable failure to provide accurate or timely information to Harbury and other U.S. citizens related to crime victims in Guatemala, the board also called for better government record-keeping and a more helpful gov-

ernment attitude in such cases.

While the board acknowledged in its report that the business of spying—which often means persuading a foreigner to betray his or her country—necessarily brings the CIA into contact with criminal figures and people with records of sordid behavior, the board listed several examples of informants in Guatemala whose activities were so egregious that they should have been shunned.

One unnamed informant "was the subject of allegations that in multiple instances he ordered and planned assassinations of political opponents and extrajudicial killings of criminals," the report said. Another was alleged to have "planned or to have had prior

knowledge of multiple separate assassinations or assassination attempts." A third was accused of involvement in killings and kidnappings, while "a few" others were accused of "acts of intimidation."

Anthony Harrington, a Washington lawyer who directed the board's probe, declined to say exactly how many CIA informants were in such activities or to provide any other details, in part because of what he described as a reluctance by the CIA to reveal the extent of its "penetration" of the Guatemalan government and military forces.

He attributed the CIA's failure to take a hard look at these informants partly to the "aura of secrecy" that surrounds all foreign activities of the CIA's Directorate of Operations, or clandestine service. He attributed it al-

so to the relentless emphasis of CIA managers during this period on recruiting as many "assets" as possible, regardless of quality or behavior.

"How do spies get promoted?" Harrington said when asked why such serious abuses as murder and torture did not make CIA managers cringe. "People adjust their conduct to what the reward system is."

In addition to finding that the CIA's station in Guatemala failed to investigate reports about scurrilous activities by some of its informants, the board confirmed a long-standing suspicion in Washington that the agency's employees in Guatemala became too close to their Guatemalan government contacts and wound up overlooking some of those contacts' worrisome activities.

In one significant instance docu-

mented by the CIA inspector general in 1994 but publicly described in detail for the first time by the board, the station chief "delayed, diluted, and suppressed some reports because he feared they would hurt the reputation of the Guatemalan military services and his ability to work with them."

The board also blamed the superiors of these officers at Washington headquarters for tending to withhold embarrassing details about their Guatemalan contacts from their colleagues, instead passing along mostly favorable information.

Deutch, in a statement, said, "I take these findings extremely seriously and last year directed the CIA to put corrective measures in place. The CIA has done this, and I note the IOB report recognizes this fact."