

Caracas Is Talking About

The Secret Police

By Joanne Omang
Washington Post

Caracas, Venezuela

WHEN LEFTIST Jorge Rodriguez died under interrogation by the Venezuelan security police — DISIP — last July, the fact was not revealed by his outraged comrades, as would have been the case in most Latin American countries. His death was announced by the government itself, which promptly fired the DISIP commander.

Venezuela is a democracy, complete with election campaigns every two years and a highly vocal press. The fact that they exist alongside a secret police capable of killing suspects points out some basic differences between U.S. and Latin American concepts of popular rule.

Persons with past ties to DISIP have been implicated in the October 6 bombing of a Cuban airliner — a case that DISIP is now investigating. DISIP originated with a chief of state who demanded personal loyalty and felt he was being undermined by his enemies.

★ ★ ★

ROMULO BETANCOURT became Venezuela's president in 1958. After spending years in jail and exile, Betancourt and his Democratic Action Party overthrew dictator Marcos Perez Jimenez and called elections, the first in ten years and the second since the country was founded.

Perez Jimenez had been identified with his secret police, whose murders and tortures had contributed to popular support for his ouster. Betancourt quickly abolished the secret police. Then guerrillas inspired by Fidel Castro's Cuban revolution of 1959, which Betancourt's party had support-



ed with money and arms, rose against Betancourt. The president turned violently anti-Castro.

At the same time, refugees coming out of Cuba included many former intelligence agents who had worked against Castro under the old Fulgencio Batista regime. Landing in Caracas, they were asked for advice and eventually put to work against the Cuban guerrilla threat.

"The police leaders were picked specifically for their loyalty to Betancourt's party and to Betancourt, who was afraid the old Perez Jimenez gang would use the troubles to try to get back into power," an activist explained.

DISIP, then called DIGEPOL, or General Police Directorate, grew in the early '60s to more than 1000 persons, many with U.S. training in counter-insurgency.

★ ★ ★

THE INTERIOR MINISTER in charge of the police at the time was Carlos Andres Perez, who is now president. He had developed a reputation as a tough cop. His adversaries called him "the assassin."

As the guerrilla threat weakened at home under Perez' attack, however, the strong-arm DIGEPOL techniques came under increasing fire from within Betancourt's party. At the same time CIA involvement was being scaled down here.

When the Social Christian Copei party took power in 1969, President Rafael Caldera reorganized DIGEPOL and changed its name to DISIP, Security and Preventive Intelligence Directorate. Most of the old Democratic Action party loyalists, including most of the Cubans, left the organization. Other Cubans and new Caldera troops came in.

An exception to this rule was the Cuban refugee Luis Posada Carriles, a former Batista security agent who now is one of four men charged in the Cuban airliner sabotage in which 73 persons died. Like many other anti-Castro Cubans, he did Miami CIA work and joined the Venezuelan security police under the Democratic Action party.

Posada stayed on through the Caldera government, however, and was rewarded for his shift in alliance with one of DISIP's operations directorates in 1971. During this period he maintained "a casual acquaintance," in the words of the U.S. embassy here, with FBI agent Joseph Leo in the course of Leo's work as the embassy legal attache.

When the Democratic Action party came back to power in 1973 under Perez, Posada was fired. He set up a private detective agency equipped with high-powered radios, hiring a part-time Venezuelan news photographer, Hernan Ricardo Losana, to do field work for him. Ricardo, 25, was arrested in Trinidad the day of the plane crash along with Freddy Lugo and faces trial with Posada in Venezuela.