# In Guatemala, Officers' Killings Echo Dirty War


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Three Salvadoran congressmen, visiting Guatemala for a meeting of the Central American Parliament, were kidnapped and driven to an isolated farm where they were executed, and their bodies and car were burned.

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GUATEMALA CITY, March 3 — After three Salvadoran congressmen were waylaid and killed on a road in Guatemala last month, it did not take the authorities long to find the culprits: they were Guatemalan police officers, and their unmarked police car had a tracking device that proved they were at the scene.

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Four Guatemalan police officers confessed to the crime and were sent to a maximum security prison, where they were killed four days later.

They quickly confessed, saying they thought their victims were drug dealers, and were sent to a maximum-security prison.

It is a measure of the weakness of the crime-plagued Guatemalan state that what happened just four days later remains something of a mystery — aside from the indisputable fact that the four who confessed ended up dead.

The police and the interior minister say that rioting gang members inside the prison shot and stabbed them. But other inmates and their visitors that day say a group of heavily armed men in military garb and ski masks made their way through seven locked doors and executed them, with no interference from guards, removing any possibility that they could identify co-conspirators.

The two sets of brazen killings set off a vicious diplomatic conflict between Guatemala and El Salvador — heightened by news reports suggesting that the congressmen were indeed drug dealers — and ignited a political scandal here. It shed light on how corrupt the National Police has become, and raised questions about links between drug dealers and high-level police officials, as well as whether the government can contain drug trafficking without international help.

One assistant police chief has been forced to resign and another has been suspended. On Thursday, the interior minister and top police officials appeared before Congress, where they were grilled not only on whether death squads exist inside the police force, but on

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how the state failed to protect the four officers.

Perhaps more important, the whole episode has exposed to the world the rampant police corruption, lawlessness and drug trafficking that plagues much of Central America, and Guatemala in particular.

This small country of 12.3 million people has more than 5,000 homicides a year, many of them vigilante killings or gangland murders, human rights advocates say. Arrests are made in only 2 percent of the cases.

Drug trafficking fuels the violence, and United States officials say Guatemala's record on taking down drug lords leaves much to be desired. At least two-thirds of the cocaine used in American cities — much of it made from coca cultivated in Colombia and Bolivia — passes through Guatemala, American officials report, and several former military officers have been accused of trafficking.

President Óscar Berger and his minister of interior say they are attacking the problem and point out it was Guatemalan police officers who caught the rogue officers in the first place. Mr. Berger has also backed a proposal to create an international commission to investigate human rights abuses by the police.

Since 1993, the United States has twice helped set up special antinarcotics forces here, only to watch their commanders become embroiled in the drug trade themselves. President Bush is scheduled to visit next week, and American diplomats say the lack of public security here is near the top of his agenda.

Human rights advocates and opposition politicians have taken the two sets of killings as proof that criminal gangs have corrupted Guatemala's national police force and that groups of officers are operating like drug syndicates, robbing and killing competing dealers.

The squads of rogue officers, human rights experts and others say, are in a sense an outgrowth of Guatemala's long internal conflict. Some former military officers who came of age during the bloody counterinsurgency operations of the 1980's are members of the new rogue squads, according to human rights experts and opposition politicians. They say other members are younger, but have adopted the old practices of assassination and terrorism to combat crime and, sometimes, to line their own pockets.

"The truth, I think, is the problem comes from the end of the armed conflict, when the state tried to protect itself against rebels," said the editor of La Hora newspaper, Óscar Clemente Marroquín. "When the war stopped, the apparatus kept operating the same way but now it doesn't protect the military. Now it protects organized crime."

A high-ranking United Nations official here, who requested anonymity to protect his diplomatic neutrality, said he believed the Interior Ministry and the National Police created death squads over the last three years, trying to combat the wave of violent crime by gangs like the notorious Mara Salvatrucha, a group started in Los Angeles by the children of Central American civil-war refugees of the 1980s.

The officers in those squads belong to evangelical churches, the official said, and see the extrajudicial killings of gang members, known here as "social cleansing," as holy work. But they have also begun to commit crimes for their own profit. "It gets out of their hands," the official said. "They create a Frankenstein."

Otto Pérez Molina, the leader of the Patriotic Party and a candidate for president, has also charged there are at least two separate groups of rogue officers operating within the National Police, each controlled by a deputy commissioner.

Erwin Sperisen, the national police chief, denies that the force harbors death squads, though he acknowledges that his department is riddled with corrupt officers who sometimes commit crimes. Because of strong labor laws and poor vetting procedures, he said, he has not been able to purge the 19,000-member force of officers who came from the two main police forces that controlled the country during the civil war and were schooled in torture and assassination.

"One has to break with this kind of schooling," he said.

At first, the killings of the Salvadoran congressmen appeared to be politically motivated.

One of the three was Eduardo José D'Aubuisson, son of Roberto D'Aubuisson, the late Salvadoran right-wing leader and founder of the current governing party. But now many here say Eduardo and the others, along with their driver, were the latest victims of rogue police officers run amok. The three were there to attend a meeting of the Central American Parliament, a regional body.

About 10:30 a.m. on Feb. 19, Luis Arturo Herrera, a decorated officer who was head of the Guatemalan National Police organized crime unit, and three other officers used their unmarked sedan to cut off the congressmen's luxury four-wheel-drive car in front of a shopping center on the outskirts of Guatemala City, prosecutors say.

They forced the driver and Mr. D'Aubuisson into their sedan, leaving the other two congressmen in their car, and then drove both vehicles back down the highway toward El Salvador, where a traffic camera filmed them, according to the prosecutor in charge of the inquiry, Álvaro Matus.

A short time later, witnesses told prosecutors, they also stopped at a gasoline station, where they were joined by at least two other police officers and two people in civilian clothes.

The two cars then continued to an empty stretch of road near the town of Santa Elena Barilla, where according to statements by the four officers, they searched the car and beat the victims, Chief Sperisen said. Later in the afternoon, around 4:30, they went down a dirt road to a farm, where called Las Conchas. There they executed the four men with gunshots, then burned the car and the bodies. Some people living nearby found the remains about two hours later, prosecutors said.

The officers who confessed said they had been told that the congressmen were Colombian drug dealers carrying cash, according to Chief Sperisen. The whole episode appeared to be a botched robbery based on misinformation, he said.

El Salvador's chief of national police, Rodrigo Ávila, agreed that the officers probably intended to rob the group and panicked when they learned who their victims were. "When they realized they were really congressmen is when they made the decision to kill them," he said.

Mr. Ávila said his government had not ruled out the possibility the police officers were tricked. "They could have been manipulated by someone to hit the congressmen, but we don't know," he said.

The Salvadoran president, Elías Antonio Saca, and top security officials have accused Guatemalan authorities of allowing the four officers who confessed to be killed as part of a cover-up. The Salvadorans have also bristled at theories put forward by Guatemalan investigators that the congressmen might have been carrying drugs or illicit cash.

Mr. Matus, the prosecutor, says he still has not determined why the three congressmen were killed.

Nor have prosecutors made much progress getting to the bottom of what happened at El Boquerón prison on Feb. 25.

The warden at El Boquerón and more than 20 guards have been arrested but have shed no light on the matter. The police have discovered pistols hidden in the inmates' quarters that may have been used in the killings, though some of the shells recovered inside the prison came from assault rifles.

For their part, the inmates maintain they rioted only after the killings, fearing they would become scapegoats. They took hostages and forced the government to send in a television news crew and the country's human rights ombudsman to hear their version of events.

Family members of the inmates, meanwhile, told local reporters they were ordered out of the prison before visiting hours were over, which they took as a sign the guards knew something was about to happen.

The country's top prosecutor, Juan Luis Florido, has promised to get to the bottom of both crimes, even if they reach to the upper echelons of the police or government.

But human rights advocates are skeptical. The attorney general's office does not have the resources, the independence or the strength to investigate the National Police, they say.

"I wouldn't go so far as to call it a failed state, but it's very dysfunctional," said Dan Wilkinson of Human Rights Watch. "The main thing is the drugs and corruption. There is a huge amount of money there. And you have extremely weak institutions that are no match for these organized crime groups."

*Eugene Palumbo contributed reporting from El Salvador.*

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