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GUATEMALAN REACTION TO SHIPMENT OF ARMS ON SS ALFHEM

An official Guatemalan reply to the announcement by the U.S. Department of State that an important shipment of arms had arrived in the Guatemalan port of Puerto Barrios from Communist-controlled territory on the SS ALFHEM did not come until Foreign Minister Guillermo TORIELLO's statement and press conference on 21 May.

Prior to this time, the foreign ministry limited itself to a statement on 19 May, which was carried in most Guatemalan newspapers:

"The purchase of arms from any nation of the world is a normal exercise of a country's sovereignty. No limitation or control exists which restricts this form of trade."

On 16 May, the day following the announcement of the ALFHEM's arrival, Alfredo CHOCANO, Charge d'Affaires of the Guatemalan embassy in Washington, said that he had no reason to doubt the State Department announcement, but denied that there was anything "grave" about it. He added:

"We haven't been able to buy a single cartridge from any foreign (western) country."

On 18 May CHOCANO walked out of a dinner meeting when the speaker, Senator Alexander Wiley, referred to the "ominous arrival" of the shipment in Guatemala.

Anti-Communist and anti-government newspapers in Guatemala, normally in strong opposition to the government, have unanimously defended the government's action in buying arms from any source.

The prominent anti-Communist editor of Guatemala's largest paper, El Imparcial commented on 17 May that he saw nothing illegal in the arms shipment. He criticized the U.S. for furnishing arms to Caribbean dictatorships, such as the Dominican Republic, when those arms are used "for the internal oppression of their people."

The strongly anti-government, anti-Communist, and sometimes anti-U.S. paper La Hora commented on 18 May:

(The arms shipment) "is legitimate, within the codes of commerce. The Guatemalan government was practically unarmed and has sought arms where it could find them. The United States has refused them. The Procedure of the Guatemalan government is not strange to us, while the procedures of the United States, in making such cadal . . . seems very strange." (The United States is to blame) "because with its good offices it could have avoided such extremes. But the Americans leave everything to deteriorate in order afterwards to discharge their tons of bombs on the countries which suffered their neglect."

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Other anti-government papers claim U.S. concern over the arms shipment is exaggerated, that the U.S. refused to supply Guatemala with its legitimate defense needs and therefore could not be surprised at its getting them elsewhere, that Guatemala is not an aggressive military power and cannot threaten the Panama Canal or neighboring Central American countries as charged by U.S. senators and congressmen, and that the U.S. provides "the dictators of (Latin) America with fratricidal arms."

The pro-Communist government paper Diario de Centro America commented on the issue for the first time on 18 May. It charged that the United Fruit Company and its "servants" (i.e., the U.S. Department of State) were using the alleged Soviet origin of the arms, which it described as a "lie", to:

"... justify intervention, because it would be the only means by which they (the company) could hide their maneuvers to pay low wages or not to pay at all . . . But let the conspirators not forget that in Guatemala we are all united to unmask the lie, to shatter the lance of slander, and to defend (Guatemalan) sovereignty."

Guatemala's Communist Tribuna Popular commented for the first time on 21 May:

"Yankee government agitators did not cry out 'scandal' when it was announced that supporters of Castillo Armas (Guatemalan oppositionist exile) were purchasing materiel in West Germany through Nicaragua in order to attack Guatemala.

"It does not appear that the irascible Yankee senators and officials considered the pact signed by the United States and dictator Somoza (of Nicaragua), placing the Nicaraguan armed forces under the command of North American officers, a threat of aggression . . ."

On 21 May the Foreign Minister, TORIELLO, held his first press conference on the issue and issued a public statement which made the following points:

1. He charged that the U.S. embargo on arms shipments to Guatemala was designed to leave the country defenseless and constituted "an act of aggression." He offered to produce documentary evidence on Guatemala's "long and systematic" efforts to buy arms from the United States.

2. "It is significant that, while Guatemala was being denied the military supplies necessary for its defense . . . governing circles in the United States not only provided arms and ammunition to several governments which have maintained an unfriendly and aggressive attitude towards the government of Guatemala, but signed military pacts with these governments, producing natural and justified alarm . . . in view of the obvious and public efforts which are being made to overthrow by violence the constitutional government elected by the people.

3. The alarm raised by the U.S. over the alleged shipment of arms is "malicious and unjustified" and is an attempt to promote a meeting of the American states to prepare intervention in Guatemala.

This most recent attempt to pave the way for intervention was preceded by others in recent weeks:

a. The U.S. government's presentation of a claim for \$15,850,000 against Guatemala for damages to the United Fruit Company as a result of Guatemalan expropriation of some of the company's lands. These lands were paid for according to Guatemalan law, and the Guatemalan government has rejected the claim.

b. The Department of State's insinuation that Guatemala is responsible for the wave of strikes which broke out in Honduras early in May. TORIELLO denied Guatemalan complicity.

4. In view of the "threats of armed invasion of Guatemalan territory," which TORIELLO sees in these attempts at "intervention", "it is absolutely clear that Guatemala should seek" the means to defend itself wherever it can.

5. TORIELLO denied that the government had ever "negotiated for the purchase of arms either in the Soviet Union or in Poland" or that any military equipment from either of these two countries was not in Guatemala. But, even if there were, he maintains the right of the government to buy them from any country in the world. "Guatemala is not a North American colony, nor an associated state," and does not have to ask permission for what it does.

When TORIELLO, according to the New York Times, was reminded at the press conference that the State Department had not named either the Soviet Union or Poland as a source of the arms, but that they had come from Communist-controlled territory, TORIELLO replied: "For us, Communist-controlled territory is the Soviet Union. Other countries are sovereign."

6. TORIELLO ended by denying any aggressive intent on the part of the Guatemalan government and reiterating its intention to defend itself.

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