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Modern Guatemalan terrorism can be traced back to 1949 and the formation of the Guatemalan Communist Party, which three years later became the Guatemalan Labor Party (PGT). In the early 1960s, radical elements of the PGT joined with survivors of two unsuccessful military uprisings as well as members of a student opposition group to form the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR). This organization spawned the first significant terrorist campaigns in Guatemala, and the problem has been a major one ever since.

In 1965, the FAR split over the issue of control by the PGT. One faction became the Revolutionary Armed Forces, the action arm of the Communist Party (PGT/FAR, as distinguished from the original FAR), while the other faction pursued a more independent course. Between 1965 and 1974 terrorist activities reached a peak with the murders of the US and West German ambassadors, two US military advisers, and prominent Guatemalan Government and business leaders; the kidnaping of a Guatemalan Foreign Minister and a US Labor Attache; and attacks on United Fruit Company holdings and small army garrisons.

During this period, the organizations underwent a series of further splits and mergers that left the guerrilla movement without a central leadership. In 1974, Julio Cesar Macias Mayora, alias "Cesar Montes," formed yet another new faction, the Poor People's Army (EGP), which is now the predominant group in Guatemala. The various factions of the EGP total roughly 500 guerrillas and hard-line militants with perhaps 2,000 support personnel. The urban, plains, and mountain segments are well organized and under the effective control of a single unified national leadership.

The EGP has the capability to carry out limited operations in most areas of Guatemala, but it generally confines its activities to Quiche and Huehuetenango Departments in the northwest, Alta Verapaz and Peten Departments in the northeast, Escuintla Department in the south, and Guatemala City. The government has occasionally undertaken large countersubversive campaigns in the outlying areas, particularly in Quiche, but has not been very successful. The guerrillas take advantage of the difficult terrain, inexperience of government troops, and local sympathy.

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The long string of factional rifts in the Guatemalan terrorist establishment that produced the EGP involved differences of personality and strategy more than issues of revolutionary ideology. Recruitment, publicity and self-aggrandizement seem almost to be more important to the EGP and some other groups than social revolution.

The EGP is apparently a Cuban-oriented Communist organization. It claims to be fighting a "people's war" against wealthy industrialists, large landowners, some foreign firms, and the military government, which the EGP seeks to overthrow. Although it has international ties, the EGP's goals are primarily nationalistic. The terrorist groups in general believe that campaigns of violence will provoke the government into imposing a state of siege, and that the resulting strictures on civil liberties will generate mass opposition.

The strategy of the EGP is to strengthen itself and win mass support through propaganda campaigns, economic sabotage, bombings, recruitment of peasants and students, and kidnappings and assassinations of prominent business and political leaders. It has been notably successful in all of these areas. There are also reports that the EGP plans to exploit the Belize controversy. If tensions between Guatemala and Belize rise and require the Guatemalans to reinforce the border area, the EGP would step up activities in those parts of the country where military forces are reduced. The terrorists reportedly are even willing to promote tensions on the border by staging incidents and kidnappings.

In the past year and a half, the EGP has assassinated a number of people, including regional military commissioners, police, and lower ranking public officials; bombed homes of prominent industrialists and a downtown Guatemala City Sheraton hotel; kidnapped businessmen and the Salvadoran Ambassador; and raided sugar and coffee plantations, destroying buildings, equipment, planes, and crops. A year ago, an EGP band seized a Shenandoah Oil Company drilling camp in Quiche Department and forced down a Guatemalan Air Force helicopter.

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In the past few months, the EGP has been less active than the PGT/FAR, the action arm of the Communist Party. Generally, the Soviet-oriented PGT has been less prone to violence, and instead has utilized its support among university students and its control of the Autonomous Labor Federation of Guatemala to promote party interests. During the last year, however, the PGT has suffered from internal rifts that have undermined the control of the Central Committee over regional groups. In August, southern regional PGT organizations independently assassinated seven local leaders of the right-wing National Liberation Movement. In September, PGT/FAR members assassinated a former Guatemalan Defense Minister in downtown Guatemala City. The PGT has approximately 200 militants and 1,000 sympathizers in Guatemala City, Quetzaltenango, and the south coast. The PGT/FAR has about 60 members.

The Rebel Armed Forces (FAR) was once Guatemala's most active guerrilla group, but during the past year it has been concentrating on reorganization, recruitment, and propaganda distribution because of internal splits over ideology and strategy. Some members have advocated rapprochement with the PGT, while others are defecting to the EGP. The FAR has 30-40 active members. All armed actions are carried out by its National Military Commission.

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Outlook

The overall level of guerrilla activity has declined over the past few years under the Laugerud administration, but as the campaign for the presidential election in March heats up, insurgency is likely to increase. Although the guerrilla movement lacks central leadership, representatives of the leading factions reportedly are meeting to establish some sort of coalition. Considering differences over personalities, strategies, and perhaps ideology, the prospects for a unified guerrilla movement are probably not strong. In spite of international pressure to respect human rights, the Guatemalan Government will not retreat from its hard-line countersubversive measures and will endeavor to prevent terrorist disruption of the presidential election.

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