

LISTENING IN

Following are excerpts from Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, published in early February, which was submitted by the Department of State to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in accordance with provisions of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended. The report has received little public attention, owing perhaps to its completion during one Congress and issuance by another and to a printing of only 800 copies—an ostensible economy measure by the new administration. The five countries sketched below are among those making headlines today.

Argentina

At the time the military took control of the state in 1976, the situation in Argentina had deteriorated sharply. Courts and political leaders were intimidated, inflation approached 800 percent, and many essential public services were disrupted. Terrorism had taken on broad dimensions: bombings, robberies, kidnappings and assassinations for political reasons were common occurrences. Organized terrorist groups on both sides of the political spectrum numbered some 5,000-6,000 persons, with sympathizers estimated at an additional 15,000. The new government promised to restore stability, promote economic recovery, end terrorism and corruption, and ultimately to restore democracy....

The human rights situation in Argentina improved in 1980, although serious problems remained. Most seriously, fundamental, internationally recognized rights of the integrity of the person have been violated through the continued application by the security forces of the practice of disappearances, although at a level much lower than occurred in the first two years of the present military regime....

The most carefully recorded and documented list of unexplained disappearances, compiled by the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights in Buenos Aires, contains about 5,600 cases for the period 1976 to 1979. Some estimates, however, run considerably higher. There is substantial evidence that most of those persons were abducted by the security forces and interrogated under torture. Many observers believe these persons have been summarily executed....

...The military designated a new military president for the period 1981-1984, while reiterating its commitment to return the country to civilian, democratic rule. However, as of the end of 1980, no date has been fixed for that devolution....

In late 1978, the Argentine government invited the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (IAHRC) to visit Argentina....The IAHRC recorded a past pattern of wide-scale human rights abuses, including violations by the government regarding the right to life, personal security, personal liberty, due process, and freedom of opinion, expression and association. The IAHRC also noted, however, that the Argentine government cooperated fully with the Commission during its visit and, that with the exception of the Jehovah's Witnesses, freedom of religion prevails in Argentina. It reported

that there is no official policy of anti-Semitism, though in some instances Jews have been the subject of discrimination....

Chile

...Rather than returning power to civilians after the coup [that overthrew the Allende government], the military, led by General Augusto Pinochet, embarked on a wide-ranging effort to change the Chilean political and economic systems. In the period 1973-77, the regime undertook to curb dissent through a series of repressive measures, unprecedented in contemporary Chilean history. These included mass arrests, torture, exile and the disappearance of hundreds of persons. This period also saw the banning of political parties, the suspension of labor rights, the closing of many newspapers and radio stations, and the purging of the educational system.

There have been no confirmed "disappearances" since October 1977. Arbitrary detention and cases of torture continued to occur in 1980, although there has been improvement since 1977 in the treatment of prisoners and general police procedures. Political parties remain formally dissolved, and basic freedoms of speech and assembly are restricted, although some political activity, criticism, and limited press discussion are tolerated. Labor union activity continues to be under some restraints, but collective bargaining and the right to strike were restored.... The continuing "state of emergency," extended regularly every six months, gives the government extraordinary authority similar to that under a state of siege. The right to due process was weakened further in 1980....

Following two years of relative calm, Chile suffered a moderate increase in extremist violence during 1980....While increasingly active Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR) groups have claimed credit for some of these incidents, their involvement in others...has not been established....Suspicions that rightist extremists are also active continue in the absence of any breakthroughs in solving these [cited] major cases....

In September 1980, the government held a plebiscite seeking approval (by means of a simple yes or no vote) of a new constitution and political transition plan. The plan restores congressional elections in 1990 and regular presidential elections in 1997. In 1989 there will be another plebiscite on a junta-proposed candidate for president until 1997. The alternative to approval was continuance of the status quo....

The government set a precedent when in July 1978 it allowed members of the special ad hoc working group of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNHRC) to conduct a long-delayed visit to Chile....

The Catholic Church, along with the representatives of several other religious communities, has taken the lead in defending human rights and implementing social action programs....The Chilean Commission for Human Rights, now two years old, has also publicized abuses and spoken out strongly against them....

El Salvador

El Salvador has long been dominated by powerful elites who ruled through the security forces. The elites' power rested in large landholdings and in the control of

banking and the export of staple crops for their benefit. Faced with increasing demands for social change in the 1970s, traditional ruling groups continued their dominance by employing electoral fraud and repression. In the 1970s some political forces which were previously moderate joined the radical left. The late '70s witnessed the emergence of an armed radical left. On October 15, 1979, a group of progressive military officers overthrew the regime of General Humberto Romero and created a civilian-military governing coalition called the Revolutionary Governing Junta (JRG)....

Unable to act effectively and frustrated by their own inability to agree on promised reforms and to control the security forces, the civilian members of the first post-October 15 government resigned after ten weeks. The military members of the Junta then reached an agreement with the Christian Democratic Party to form a new government. In spite of coup attempts from the extreme right, guerrilla warfare from the radical left, and terrorism from all sides, this second Junta undertook a far-reaching socio-economic reform program in March. Those reforms nationalized large estates, the export of staple crops, and the financial institutions.

Alarmed by reforms which attack the very basis of their domination, the armed extreme right has declared its intention to bring down the government and reestablish the old order through violence perpetrated by its supporters, some of whom are members of the security forces only nominally under the control of the Junta. The armed left has rejected the reforms and also declared its intention to bring down the revolutionary government through violence in order to establish a Marxist state in El Salvador....

About 9,000 persons have been killed in 1980....The government has been unable to end such abuses....

The government has invited the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to make a second visit....

Guatemala

Violence has plagued Guatemalan history, and there have been many non-constitutional changes of government. In 1980, kidnapping and assassinations reached higher levels than in 1979. Deaths which appeared to be politically motivated averaged about 75 to 100 each month. Reportedly these acts were carried out by armed extremists of the left and right and by elements of the official security forces. The government has not taken effective steps to halt abuses or carry out serious investigations. The high incidence of political and personal violence continued to seriously affect the exercise of most fundamental liberties. Abductions and assassinations have the effect of rendering habeas corpus and fair trial meaningless....

The government states it is engaged in a life or death struggle against armed, radical Marxist groups, especially active in 1980 in the central highlands....

Charges of human rights violations such as degrading treatment, arbitrary arrest and summary execution are made regularly, particularly in those rural areas where Marxist guerrillas have intensified violence against the government, its allies, and business interests. Guatemalan security forces have increased efforts to eradicate the guerrillas. Innocent persons often are the victims of

indiscriminate violence from both sides. It is frequently impossible to differentiate politically inspired from privately inspired violence. The government has resisted pressure to impose a state of emergency which would permit the suspension of some constitutional freedoms and protections. Violence inhibited opposition political activity, although the nationwide municipal elections in April 1980 were widely viewed as open and correct. Violence and threats of retribution have also damaged free expression and labor organization.

Victims of the violence in 1980 included military and police personnel, government officials, pro-government politicians, businessmen, opposition political leaders, peasants and large numbers of students, academics and trade union activists. Fears for their safety spurred numerous academics and opposition politicians into self-exile, and the Bishop of El Quiche withdrew all Catholic clergy from his Diocese after the murder of two priests and other incidents in that area of rising army-guerrilla conflict....

In 1980 the UN Human Rights Commission charged the Guatemalan Government with tolerating human rights abuses....Guatemala postponed indefinitely a prior invitation to the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights to conduct an on-site investigation....A local human rights commission, organized in late 1979, announced its disbandment in 1980 with the explanation that conditions did not permit fulfillment of its monitoring role.

Nicaragua

During its first full year in power, the Government of National Reconstruction (GRN) has undertaken a number of ambitious policies to rebuild Nicaragua from the destruction left by the civil war of 1979 which overthrew the Somoza regime and to distribute economic wealth more evenly. The Nicaraguan Government has publicly committed itself to respect human rights and has cooperated with visits by human rights organizations. However, the continued imprisonment without trial of over 5,000 political prisoners, the dubious standards of justice followed by special tribunals established to try the political prisoners, occasional reports of abuse of prisoners, and restrictions on freedom of the press and political assembly raise questions about the GRN's commitment to respect the human rights of all its citizens.

The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) has assumed a dominant role in the political process and is the principal power within the government. While other political groups exist, and are determined to pursue a pluralistic society and a mixed economy, the GRN has increasingly restricted non-FSLN political activity and the independent media....

The GRN has welcomed the interest of the international community in human rights observance in Nicaragua. In 1980, it received visits from the International Commission of Jurists (in July), Amnesty International, and the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (in October) to review current practices....but has taken few steps to redress abuses of the special tribunals....