## RISING LAND VALUES BRING OUT THE DEATH SQUADS

ACCORDING to the Central American Jesuits, Guatemala's government-sanctioned death squads murdered 3,200 people last year.<sup>1</sup>

This was an increase on 1978, when about 1,000 people died or "disappeared." The figures show a dramatic rise in the deaths monitored during the mid'70s, and the explanation is that speculators have begun to cashin on rising land values.

Slayings are a routine part of a systematic effort by the country's landowning oligarchy to prevent land reform. The savagery is not mindless, but part of a long-term strategy aimed at preserving the existing distribution of land.

The current crisis can be traced back to 1954, when President Arbenz redistributed 1.5m. acres of land to 100,000 peasants. Much of the land was not cultivated. About 400,000 acres belonged to the US-owned United Fruit Company, which refused to accept the offer of compensation.

A CIA-sponsored coup toppled Arbenz, who was a moderate liberal from an aristocratic family. The land reform was put into reverse, and 10 years later the official census (Segundo Censo Agropecuario, 1964) reported that 2% of the farms accounted for 63% of the arable land. In contrast, 87% of the total number of farms occupied 19% of the arable land and each averaged under two hectares in size.

The concentration of land ownership continued, and it is now estimated that 2% of the population owns 75% of cultivable land.

The stakes, then, are high. While the majority of Guatemala's population of 6m. live in poverty, something like 200 families luxuriate in riches

derived from the ownership of land: and they mean to keep things going their way, even though they have created the conditions for civil war.

BALLOT rigging has been just one method of ensuring that power remains in the hands of land-owners, who have structured the political system to fit the distribution of property rights to land.

For example, 4,000 rural localities which qualify as administrative units with independent armed bodies for law enforcement are, in fact, individual private landholdings:

"Over 4,000 of these localities are organised farms constituting a form of company town work force. Some develop fairly sizeable security units of their own, making governmental control largely unnecessary from the viewpoint of the farmowner."

These local parapolice forces are reported to be responsible for the majority of deaths and disappearances in rural areas.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the landowners have direct control over the legally-sanctioned instruments of terror; and they have used their powers to annihilate all opposition.

LANDOWNERS, however, are not just interested in retaining their share of the distribution of land: they do not want to pay wages above subsistence level.

Their control over most of the best land has pushed the Indians, the descendants of the Mayan empire, up into the marginal lands of the hills. Here overfarming and lack of terracing of the steep fields has meant steady erosion and smaller crops.

The 500,000 Indians who are forced into seasonal employment on the big plantations have to accept wages of under \$2-a-day.

In recent years, however, the

peasants have been forming cooperatives. These are designed to increase credit, and help to improve productivity.

Lowland landowners have branded the development as "communism." For, they fear, "the co-operatives will improve conditions in the highlands and thus discourage the Indians from working for slave-wages in the plantations."6

So co-operative organisers have become prime targets for the Right-wing death squads, deaths which in the literature of the civil rights workers are recorded as "extra-judicial executions."

MOST OF THE murdered people are rural peasants, who are defenceless against the well-equipped army and para-military forces.

Peasants who try to organise themselves have done so with fatal results. For example, between 3,000 and 8,000 are reported to have died in the

## **GUATEMALA:**1

"Disappearances" and probable exti

Peasants
Opposition
Unidentified bodies
Bodies identified by name only

TOTAL: 1105. This does not include and dead in the aftermath of the earthquake

Percentage totals: Peasants, 25%. Opp Unidentified bodies, 21%. Bodies identified The unidentified and those identified by to have been peasants or poor urban resi

SOURCE: Guatemala, London: Amnesty Internation



Zacapa-Izabal campaign Oct. 1966 to March 1968.

The total number of deaths and disappearances since 1966 is likely to exceed 20,000, most of them peasants or urban poor. And the annual death list is likely to continue rising, for the simple reason that land values are rising in the northern provinces.

"One factor alleged by observers to have affected the situation in the Quiche area has been the rapid increase in value of the land - presently occupied largely by peasant smallholders organised in co-operatives – due to the planned construction of a major highway into the area linking agricultural land with national markets, as well as the discovery of petroleum deposits in the region."

The share of deaths in the north,

## HE DEATH LIST

udicial executions, 1972-April 1976

1072 1072 1074 1075 4- 4-

19/2	19/3	19/4	19/5	1976
30	151	25	52	24
39	34	10	29	12
80	57	44	12	35
147	167	56	57	44
296	409	135	150	115

stimated but unconfirmed 200 shot February 1976.

sition, 11%.

by name only, 43%.

ame only are generally considered

al, Briefing Paper No. 8, 1976, p. 12.

which is the most sparselypopulated area of the country, rose from 4% in 1972 to 28% in 1976

An example of the horror which can result from the defence of traditional rights to land is the massacre in the market place at Panzós.

Over 100 Indian peasants, including 25 women and children, were killed on May 29, 1978. The Ministry of Defence issued its version: 34 people "armed were killed when peasants" staged a surprise attack on the garrison.8

The Copenhagen-based International Work Group Indigenous Affairs, which has documented the tragedy, is sceptical. "It does not seem reasonable for a group of peasants to attack an army outpost with machetes. Or to take women and children with them."9

The cause of the deaths is an age-old one: land-grabbing. Existing plantation owners are extending their holdings with the active assistance of the country's agricultural agency, INTA.

The aim is to cash-in on the rise in land values. Expectations leapt when it was learnt that the large oil deposits in neighbouring Mexico originate from oil strata that extend into the subsoil of northern Guatemala and southern Belize.

"However, in order to get any profit out of the oil, it has to be transported to the

centre of the country. This will happen by means of a pipeline that is to pass through Alta Verapaz, including the Panzós district. The projected pipeline and wildcat drilling have meant that prices for land have begun to go up. Expecting even higher price rises, the big landowners try often with the help of the military forces to oust the Indian peasants from their land."10

By removing the Indians, the landowners simultaneously accomplish both their goals. They reap the benefits of increasing land values, and enlarge the pool of landless workers who act as a check on the wage-aspirations of plantation workers.

Gen. Romeo Lucas Garcia, who took over the Presidency last July, is one of the big landowners in the Alta Verapas province. So is the Minister of Defence.

Guatemala is a signatory of the American Convention on Human Rights (1969), and is a party to the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man (1948).

## REFERENCES

- Roger Plant, 'Repression drives Guatemalans to Guardian, 18.2.80. to desperation', The
- Andrew Graham-Yooll, 'Tide of revolu-
- tion rises', *The Guardian*, 18.2.80. *The Massacre at Panzos*, Copenhagen: IWGIA, 1978, p. 10.
- Area Handbook for Guatemala, US Government Printing Office, 1973.
- Guatemala, London: Amnesty International, 1976, p. 9.
- Alan Riding, 'The army turns left', Financial Times, 12.9.75.
- Guatemala, op. cit., p. 13.
- The Massacre at Panzos, op. cit. pp. 16-17.
- 9. *Ibid.*, p. 8. 10. IWGIA Newsletter No. 19, June 1978, pp. 3-4.