

Guatemala:

Relief May Help the Other Tragedy

By Religious News Service

The current effort by religious, independent and government relief agencies to respond to the earthquake devastation that left more than 22,000 dead in Guatemala is focusing new attention on that deeply troubled Central American nation which for decades has been wracked by political violence and civil unrest.

For little Guatemala, a nation of just under 6 million people — the large majority of whom are economically depressed — the Feb. 4 earthquake and its aftermath are the latest, but not the least of its calamities.

Significantly, the 30,000 deaths attributed to political violence over the last ten years, including the assassinations of a U.S. and a West German ambassador — exceed the death toll of the recent earthquake.

And with respect to current rebuilding efforts, questions already being posed by Latin America observers include: How will the political and social system in Guatemala emerge from the earthquake's ravages following long-term aid and rehabilitation? Will the government be less restrictive in its dealings with the poor and Indian populations or follow the path of its neighbor, Nicaragua, which used earthquake relief (funds and materials) to strengthen the regime's repressive policies?

Two leading U.S. observers of the Latin American scene, Thomas Quigley of the U.S. Catholic Conference, Washington, D.C., and the Rev. William Wipfler of the National Council of Churches, New York, agreed that safeguards should be implemented by relief agencies in Guatemala to ensure that money and supplies intended for rebuilding are not used for political purposes.

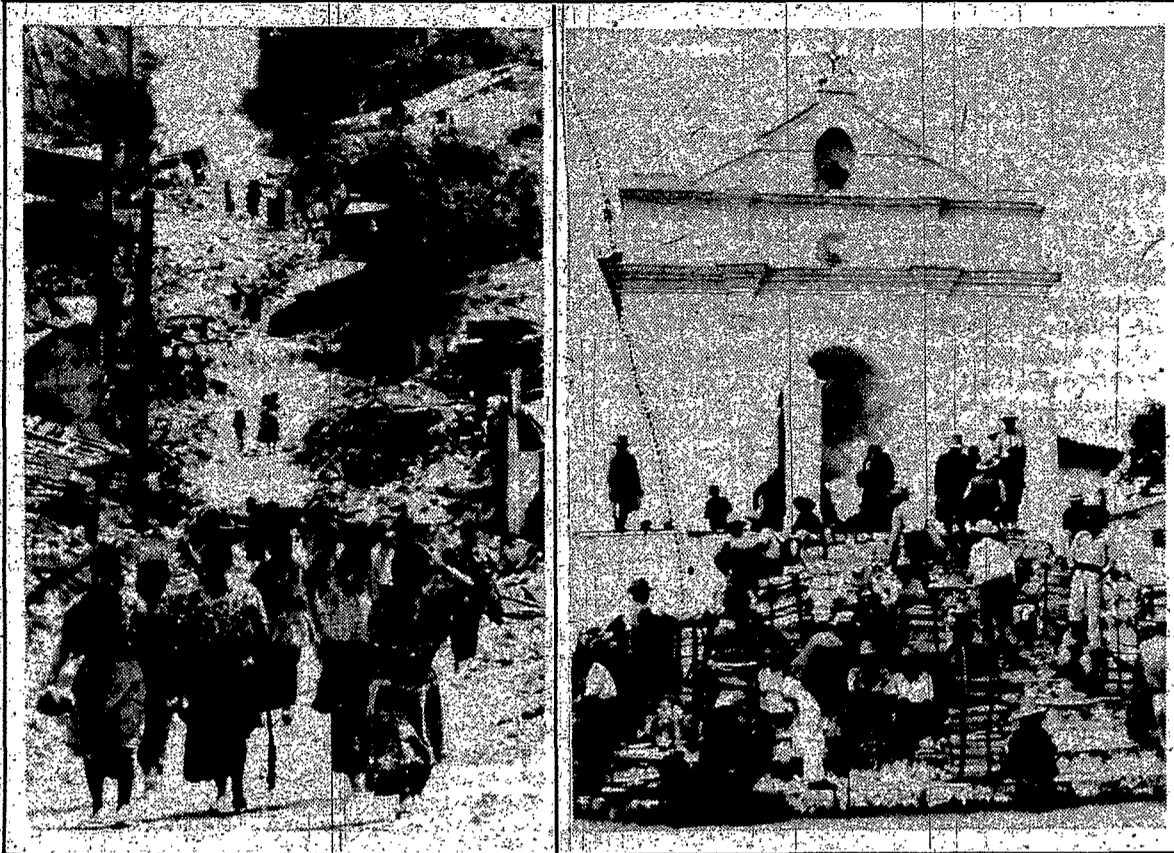
Mr. Wipfler, who conceded that the present Guatemalan president, Gen. Kjell Laugerud Garcia, does not have as tight a political rein as Gen. Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua, said, however, that the relief effort will have to be closely monitored. He also said there is the "possibility" that the efforts of more democratic countries, in working to rebuild Guatemala, could encourage a less oppressive atmosphere there.

Although Guatemala is now reeling from the disastrous quake, which also left more than a million homeless and hundreds of thousands injured, the stigma of political violence and repression of human rights remains.

In July, 1975, Amnesty International, an independent agency based in London, included Guatemala on a list of six Latin American nations where it said serious human rights violations had occurred. In addition to reported arbitrary arrests of agrarian peasants, the human rights agency said there had been instances of torture and violent deaths. It added that the Guatemalan press reported many rural deaths following torture or mutilation of arrested people.

As recently as last January, just a few weeks before the earthquake struck, several press reports in Guatemala indicated that the political violence and terror is continuing.

One report said that four Indian campesinos (farm peasants) were killed and several others wounded by a police patrol in Chisec in the province of Alta Vera Paz. The police reportedly shot the Indians during an attempt to evict them from lands they had been working without titles for years.



The earthquake which devastated much of Guatemala is drawing attention to the political violence and civil unrest that has troubled the Central American nation for decades. At left, women of San Pedro Sacatepequez walk up a hill carrying belongings they had salvaged from the rubble of their village. At right, fire wood is sold on the steps leading to the chapel at Chichicastenango, the famous Guatemalan mountain shrine town where the Indians have developed a peculiar mixture of Christian and pagan rites. The chapel was damaged in the recent earthquake. (RNS)

Bishop Juan Gerardi Conadera of the Roman Catholic diocese of Vera Paz Coban (who is also president of the Guatemalan bishops' conference) and 26 priests and religious of his diocese, publicly denounced the killings. They urged the government to investigate and to begin granting land titles to avoid such incidents in the future.

The bishop declared that "violence will break out again as long as the problem of land tenure exists. We are urging the government to give the land to the Indians (who make up more than half the population) who have been working it. They need it."

In another incident, reported in January by La-Nacion, a Guatemala City newspaper, some 30 Indian campesinos were said to have "disappeared" in mid-1975 from a small community called Ixcan Grande in the sparsely settled region in the provinces of Quiché and Huehuetenango.

Government planes dropped paratroops into the village in what was claimed to be a search for guerrillas. The Indian men were reportedly taken away by the troops for questioning and have not been seen since that time. As a result, the paper said, crops were lost and the families were left without breadwinners. Ixcan Grande's Mam-speaking Indians have said they do not know what guerrillas are.

After the La Nacion report of the disappearance, Defense Minister Gen. Fernando Lucas Garcia claimed that "no peasants have disappeared" in Ixcan Grande. He admitted that the army had carried out an "anti-subversive" operation in the area, however, and added that had such a disappearance occurred "it should have been reported at the time."

Like other nations of Central America, Guatemala is made up of impoverished rural populations, growing numbers of urban slum-dwellers, small landowning elites, a few wealthy bankers and industrialists, some of whom are tied to trans-national corporations, and a military government with U.S. backing.

Within the past 30 years, there

have been attempts to install constitutional governments and implement land reform. Such movements have been strenuously opposed by large landowners and have been described as attempts to introduce communism into Guatemala.

In 1954, a U.S.-supported military force under the command of Col. Carlos Castillo Armas actually invaded Guatemala. And shortly thereafter, Col. Castillo Armas took over as president, displacing the left-leaning President Jacobo Arbenz, and began an anti-Communist campaign that admittedly included the elimination of all political opposition.

During a "public order" campaign between 1966 and 1968, directed by Col. Carlos Arana Osorio, more than 6,000 persons were killed as a result of political violence in the Province of Zapaca alone. After Col. Arana Osorio became president in 1970, he declared a "state of siege" aimed at guerrillas and subversive elements. A committee of relatives of missing persons estimated that more than 15,000 persons were killed in political assassinations during the first three years of his regime.

In the first seven months after the current president, Gen. Laugerud, took office, Guatemalan newspapers reported 135 persons killed in acts of political violence. Many of them bore evidence of torture or mutilation.

Over the years, right-wing vigilante groups, such as the Mano Blanca (white Hand) and Ojo Por Ojo (Eye for an Eye) have been said to operate without government interference and are generally known to have a strong base in the armed forces and police.

According to Suzanne Jonas of the University of California, Berkeley, Calif., who has co-authored a recent book on Guatemala, "aside from thousands of deaths, the protracted violence takes its psychological toll on the living in Guatemala. The population is maintained in a permanent state of fear and uncertainty."

She claimed that a "counter-insurgency" program is the government's way of insuring

"permanent demobilization" of the impoverished population so that foreign investors will have the stability they demand and the upper classes can maintain their privileges.

Nevertheless, in recent years, popular movements have begun to attract more support from what The New York Times called a "radicalized Roman Catholic Church," with large numbers of foreign priests seeking to help mobilize the peasant population into demanding land and recognition of basic rights.

In Guatemala, an Indian cooperative movement, started by Catholic priests in remote areas, has emerged as the first authentic rural movement in the country's history, involving about 20 per cent of the 3.5 million Indian population.

Last year, President Laugerud unexpectedly sponsored the movement and its calls for land reform, causing a split between himself and his outspoken vice president, Mario Sandoval Alarcon, who termed the cooperative movement akin to communism.

Earlier, in April 1974, several Catholic foreign missionaries — including two U.S. Maryknoll Fathers — were expelled from the country. They were accused of illegally campaigning in the country's elections in behalf of a leftist party.

Guatemala's Catholic bishops, as well as a Christian clergy and lay group made up of both Protestants and Catholics, protested the government's action. They also charged the government with harassing foreign missionaries and allowing uncontrolled violence during the elections.

One of the ousted priests, Father Joseph W. Towle, MM, of Boston, said the expulsion was the government's way of telling the Church that it does not appreciate the Church's emphasis on social justice and liberation theology preached to the poor and oppressed.

He said many of the activities of clergymen in Guatemala, such as teaching people how to plant, fertilize and use modern farming methods, as well as teaching about

the country's laws and providing literacy programs, have been called "Communist" by government officials.

But he indicated that the Guatemalan Church today will not be easily intimidated, and has publicly and firmly declared its intention to continue its God-given mission even though some conveniently misunderstand it.

For many years, Guatemala City in particular had been a battleground for leftist guerrillas, right-wing terrorists and government forces in what was described as an ideological civil war. Guerrillas were held responsible for the killing of U.S. Ambassador John Mein in 1968 and for the kidnapping and slaying of West German Ambassador Count Karl von Sprei in 1970.

Right-wing vigilantes once kidnapped Cardinal Mario Casariego of Guatemala City in an attempt to discredit the government and cause its overthrow by military coup. The action backfired, however, and several rightist officials were purged from the armed forces.

Now, in the aftermath of the worst natural disaster in the history of Guatemala, the Feb. 4 earthquake and subsequent tremors, a significant international response is taking place. Paramount in that response is the intent by relief organizations to focus on the social and economic development of Guatemala.

Such development programs — which in the past have been opposed by large land-owners and foreign investors as steps toward socialism — could play a major role in determining the economic progress of Guatemala's poor majority. They could also bring more pressure to bear on the government for the restoration of human rights.

Developmental aid may well augment the slow awakening of the Guatemalan masses to a realization of their basic rights.

CRS Aid To Guatemala: \$4.5 Million

Special to Courier-Journal

New York, N.Y. — Within the first months following the disastrous Guatemala earthquake, Catholic Relief Services has delivered more than \$4.5 million in goods and services to relieve the suffering of hundreds of thousands of quake victims.

Bishop Edward E. Swannstrom, executive director of CRS, reported that immediately after the first earthquake struck Feb. 4, CRS moved in by air and sea urgently needed supplies valued at \$600,000, plus an additional 1,000 tons of U.S. government-donated food supplies held in CRS stocks in Honduras and El Salvador.

After the immediate crisis had been met, CRS focused its emphasis on "clearing rubble from highways and village streets and from the sites of totally destroyed buildings of all types so that the hundreds of thousands affected by the earthquake can begin to start life anew," he said.

"Thus," he continued, "CRS procurement has shifted to the purchase of iron roofing, block making machines, tools ranging from picks to wheelbarrows, road clearing equipment such as bulldozers, front wheeled loaders, dump trucks, etc. . . . Within one month after the disaster itself the response of the official overseas relief and development agency of the American Bishops encompasses 6,324 tons of supplies and services valued at more than \$4.5 million."