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CRACKS IN THE WALL OF IMPUNITY & CORRUPTION:

Arrests of Guatemalan police death squad connect today's organized crime to 1980s death squads and the CIA

RIGHTS ACTION COMMENTARY:

The Nueva Linda massacre, a CAFTA protester killed, a Goldcorp Inc (then Glamis Gold) protester killed – these are just a few of numerous political crimes committed in Guatemala that Rights Action (and other groups) denounced in 2004 and 2005, and all are part of a strategy implemented by administration of justice authorities who are now being arrested for running a death squad.

BELOW: article by Annie Bird, Rights Action co-director:

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CRACKS IN THE WALL OF IMPUNITY & CORRUPTION:

Arrests of Guatemalan police death squad connect today's organized crime to 1980s death squads and the CIA

By Annie Bird (annie@rightsaction.org), August 2010

This week arrest warrants were issued against at least 19 members of an organized crime network that operated at the highest levels of Guatemalan justice administration from 2004 to 2007, though some have been active in organized crime and death squads since the 1980s.

One figure apparently involved in this network worked for President Ronald Reagan aid Lt Col. Oliver North and former CIA agent Luis Posada Carriles. Amongst other political crimes, the network appears to have been involved in the 2007 murders of PARLACEN congressmen.

The investigation by CICIG, the United Nations sponsored Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, has focused on extrajudicial executions within the prison system. Jails in Central America have played a key role in structuring and coordinating organized crime activities. Control of the prisons is critical in the struggle for dominance between organized crime networks.

Two of those wanted for arrest are Carlos Vielmann, named Minister of Governance in July 2004, and Edwin Sperinsen, named Director of the National Civil Police in August 2004. The two resigned together in March 2007 amid accusations of running a death squad and they left Guatemala in 2007. A third, Alejandro Giammettei, was Director of the Penitentiary System, and on Friday, August 6, 2010 sought asylum in the Honduran embassy in Guatemala City.

The 2007 accusations, and this week's arrests, were related to "social cleansing," extrajudicial executions, within the prison system. Though 'social cleansing' is sometimes looked upon favorably by some sectors of the public given the intolerable levels of violence, the investigations of CICIG demonstrate that this network killed gang members and criminals with the logic of protecting the higher levels of organized crime, protecting perpetrators of kidnappings, extortions, drug trafficking, and other crimes.

Sperinsen and Vielmann worked closely together, and were also implicated in a strategy of criminalizing protests and killing protestors. Incidents for which they are considered responsible include the August 31, 2004 Nueva Linda massacre, the January 11, 2005 murder of Raul Castro Bocel (while protesting the Glamis Gold/ Goldcorp Inc mine), the March 14, 2005 murder of Juan Lopez Velazquez during a protest against the Central America Free Trade Agreement CAFTA, among others.

Between August 10 and 12, at least 9 have been arrested while at least 10 arrest warrants are pending execution. Those arrested include former heads of the special police units to fight kidnapping, extortion, and an elite unit within the penitentiary system.

ARRESTED FOR PRISON MASSACRES BUT IMPLICATED IN MANY OTHER CRIMES

All of the arrests were related to two "Operations" undertaken by the network, Operacion Gavilan (Operation Hawk), which tracked three prisoners who had escaped from El Infiernito prison in October 2005 and weeks later extra-judicially executed them, and Operacion Pavo Real (Operation Peacock).

In Operacion Pavo Real, prison authorities supposedly re-took control of El Pavon prison, in the course of which seven prisoners were killed. Though the press reported that prisoners were killed in the confrontation, it was demonstrated they were executed and that the death squad had compiled a list of targets to be executed during the operation.

The operation was highly lauded, press reports claimed that a mafia had controlled the prison for 10 years, and that prison installations served as the headquarters for criminal activities, that kidnap victims were held in the prison, drugs were processed, etc.

Many of those now with arrest warrants participated directly in the operation, including then Minister of Governance, Carlos Vielmann, then Director of Police Edwin Sperisen, Chief and Assistant Chief of special investigations Javier Figueroa and Victor Soto, and Director of the Penitentiary System Alejandro Giamattei.

CICIG investigators have stated that it is expected that the network will be implicated in at least eight more crimes that will come to light over the course of the trial, including among others, drug trafficking and kidnapping.

LINKS TO CENTRAL AMERICAN PARLIAMENTARIAN KILLINGS, EDUARDO D'AUBUISSON

On February 19, 2007 a caravan of six official cars traveled from San Salvador to Guatemala City, escorted by police. Upon arriving in Guatemala City one of the cars, transporting Eduardo D'Aubuisson, Jose Ramón González and William Rissiety Pichinte, all from the ARENA party, left the caravan. They were stopped by a police car and taken to a torture center outside of Guatemala City where they were tortured for several hours

before their bodies and their car were burned and abandoned on a farm near the border with El Salvador.

The police officers implicated were quickly identified via video surveillance footage and GPS systems in police cars. Warrants for the arrest of nine officers were issued, and four were detained. The El Salvadoran and Guatemalan governments requested the assistance of the FBI, but on February 26, 2007 just hours before a scheduled polygraph tests the four police officers were killed in a maximum security prison.

Crowds of prison visitors reported that an armed contingent freely entered the prison; some claims include witnessing then Police Director Sperinsen with the squad. Approximately twenty minutes later shots were heard, and later gang members rioted. Minister of Governance Carlos Vielmann claimed the four police officers had been killed in a gang uprising, though later confronted with witness reports officials claimed the armed men forced entry into the prison.

Eduardo D'Aubuisson was the son of the infamous Roberto D'Aubuisson, death squad leader and leader of the ultra right wing ARENA party.

On July 26, 2010 Guatemalan district attorneys indicted Manuel de Jesús Castillo, a former Guatemalan congressman, and eight others in the killing of three El Salvadoran PARLACEN congressmen and their driver in Guatemala in 2007. Former El Salvadoran PARLACEN member Roberto Carlos Silva Pereira, thought to be involved in drug trafficking, is pending deportation from the United States to face charges.

Two motives for the killings have been advanced, that Silva sought revenge for his expulsion from ARENA for drug association or that they were rivals in the drug business.

At least two of those sought for arrest demonstrate a clear connection to the PARLACEN killings. In addition to Sperinsen himself, Victor Soto was part of Edwin Sperinsen's elite Anti Kidnapping Command and participated in the September 2006 raid on El Pavon prison. In March 2007 he was fired from his position of Director of the Criminal Investigations as he was the direct superior of the four police officers arrested then killed in El Boqueron.

A truck that reportedly assisted in the transportation of the victims to the torture center and farm where their bodies and car were burned was owned by Gulf cartel kingpin Jorge Arturo Paredes Cordova, also implicated in the 2008 killing of Victor Rivera, a special advisor to Minister of Governance. "El Gordo" Paredes is currently serving a 31 year sentence in the United States, convicted of cocaine trafficking after being arrested in Honduras in May 2008. He reportedly had inherited control of the Gulf cartel following the arrest of Otto Herrera.

VICTOR RIVERA– CIA ASSET WORKED WITH OLIVER NORTH & POSADA CARRILES

Victor Rivera had been a special advisor in the Ministry of Governance on kidnapping investigations since at least 2000. According to former DEA agent Celerino Castillo, Victor Rivera was originally from Venezuela but came to El Salvador as a CIA asset to work with former CIA agent Luis Posada Carriles and Ronald Regan aid Lt. Col. Oliver North in the Ilopango Air Base "drug trafficking, kidnapping and training death squads" in the early 1980's.

Rivera advised 'security structures' in El Salvador in the 1980s and early 1990. After the peace accords he became an advisor to the El Salvadoran Vice Minister of Security Hugo Barrera, with whom Rivera, under the pseudonym Zacarias, helped create the new National Civil Police and the parallel, unofficial Police Analysis Unit that operated out of the office of a business owned by Barrera.

In 1996, Rivera was forced to leave El Salvador when a warrant was issued for his arrest in relation to his role in the police killing of a medical student, Adriano Vilanova, according to some reports as a possible consequence of a romance between Vilanova and Roberto D'Aubuisson daughter. In 1997 Rivera began assisting in kidnapping investigations in Guatemala and since at least 2000 was formally contracted as an advisor to the Guatemalan Ministry of Governance, there again forming a parallel police 'investigation' apparatus.

On April 7, 2008 Victor Rivera was fatally shot while driving, one week after his contract was not renewed in the Ministry of Governance. On July 26, 2010 it was announced that as a result of CICIG investigations, an arrest warrant was issued for his secretary and principal assistant, María del Rosario Melgar for helping coordinate Rivera's murder.

According to CICIG's investigations Melgar is also implicated in the Vielmann / Sperinsen network. Rivera was reportedly very close to Vielmann.

There is also speculation that Rivera was involved in the PARLECEN killings; a video has emerged of the four officers in custody speaking with Victor Ramirez in which one reportedly said to him, "Ok, I will go (to prison), but I will take all of you with me." Three days later all four officers were dead.

It is not clear why "El Gordo" Paredes had Rivera killed. According to CICIG's Director, the two had a long standing relationship, and the murder order could have arisen from "the kidnapping of the son (of Paredes) that ended tragically, in which he could have blamed Rivera and waited years until he could take revenge, or it could be some joint activity that came out badly and as you know with this class of business you pay with your life."

ONE OF BISHOP GERARDI'S KILLERS DECAPITATED IN PRISON IN 2003, ANOTHER APPARENTLY CONNECTED TO GULF CARTEL

Sperinsen and Vielmann's positions in power began with Oscar Berger's presidency in 2004. Though no one has implicated any connection, and the events predate Vielmann, the decapitation of inmate Obdulio Villanueva on September 12, 2003 in Pavon prison demonstrates a pattern similar to other cases that implicate Vielmann's network.

Sergeant Obdulio Villanueva, together with Colonel Byron Lima Estrada and Capitan Byron Lima Oliva, father and son, were convicted of the 1998 murder of Bishop Juan Jose Gerardi following the release of the report of a Catholic Church sponsored truth commission he directed.

Obdulio Villanueva's defense was that he was in prison the night of the murder, though investigators were able to establish that Villanueva left prison at will and indeed had left the night of the murder. Villanueva had been serving a sentence for the killing of a milkman in a confusing incident while he served in the Estado Mayor Presidencial, a presidential guard and intelligence agency.

In March 2010 a notebook taken from Villanueva's accomplice, Byron Lima Oliva, showed notes with contact information for top members of the Gulf Cartel.

WHO ARE VIELMANN, SPERISEN, GIAMATTEI AND SOTO?

Carlos Vielmann began his government career with high approval as then President Oscar Berger's special commissioner on corruption. One of his first actions was rescinding over valued contracts to supply food to the prison system, coordinating new low priced contracts, an interesting fact given that food suppliers have notoriously been the suppliers of weapons to the crime networks that control Central American prisons. Vielmann quickly was named Minister of Governance. Vielmann currently lives in Spain.

Erwin Sperisen, reportedly of Swiss ancestry, currently lives in Switzerland. Sperisen's father was Guatemala's representative to the World Trade Organization. After briefly serving as advisor to the Guatemala City mayor, Sperisen was named director of the National Civil Police in 2004 with no prior experience. He is reported to have placed 30 military officers in high ranking police positions. During his term as Director of Police he was known to engage in 'social cleansing' and reportedly discussed these actions in his televised evangelical sermons.

Alejandro Giammattei is wanted for his participation in the Operation Pavo Real while Director of the Penitentiary System. He was the Presidential Candidate in 2007 for the then incumbent GANA party. On Friday, August 6, days before the arrest warrants were made public, he sought asylum in the Honduran Embassy on Friday claiming he had received death threats over the past 45 day as a result of his vocal opposition to the administration of the current President Alvaro Colom.

Yesterday the Honduran ambassador informed the press the asylum request had been denied and Giammattei was expected to leave the embassy by Friday.

Victor Hugo Soto was Director of the SIC, Special Criminal Investigation unit, of the National Civil Police. He began his police career in the police death squad known as the "Archivo" in the 1980s, and went on to serve in a series of elite police units, including anti kidnapping units. While head of SIC, in 2002, he was part of a strange incident in which police and military exchanged fire in a shoot out in Guatemala City during a kidnapping victim's ransom drop. A witness claimed Soto pocketed the ransom. In 2004 he was investigated for blocking investigation of corrupt officers. He is accused in participation in the Operacion Pavo Real. He has been closely associated with Victor Rivera. Investigators failed in an attempt to capture Soto during a birthday party for the mayor of Ocos, San Marcos, a township infamous for the high level of drug trafficking.

THE PAST IS CLOSE BEHIND

These stories go on and on; they are not over. Last week's arrest shine a small but important light on the "clandestine structures of power" that operate in Guatemala with next to complete impunity. These arrests are small but important steps in cracking the wall of corruption and impunity. Stay tuned.

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RIGHTS ACTION IS A NOT-FOR-PROFIT ORGANIZATION, with tax charitable status in Canada and the USA, that funds and works to eliminate poverty and the underlying causes of poverty, supporting community-based development, environmental, disaster relief and human rights projects and organizations in Guatemala and Honduras, as well as in Chiapas [Mexico], El Salvador and Haiti. Rights Action educates about and is involved in other work aimed at poverty eradication and critically understanding the related north-south, global development, environmental and human rights issues.

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