

# Latin American Police Get Some Pointers From Washington.

By JAMES LeMOYNE

**SAN SALVADOR** — Concern about human rights abuses by foreign police forces in the 1970's prompted Congress to prohibit United States training for such organizations. Congress later made some exceptions for programs to combat terrorism, and the Reagan Administration seems intent on making the most of them. "Our support for democratic development in Latin America must be highlighted by our support to counterterrorism," James H. Michel, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, said in November.

The Administration is training some police units in the region; the Central Intelligence Agency and military advisers have worked with military police counterterrorism units in El Salvador, and civilian police units in Costa Rica have been instructed in counterinsurgency, bomb-detection and airport security methods. The effort has prompted accusations reminiscent of the 1970's. In particular, there have been objections to C.I.A.-assisted units of Government security forces in Honduras, who were said to have killed suspected leftists.

In arguing for the training, the Administration says the police must be helped to combat terrorism by leftist rebels determined to undermine fragile elected governments. American officials concede that many of the Central American security forces have unsavory records. But, they argue, it is in the interest of the United States to try to improve their performance, even if Americans dirty their hands to do so. So the Administration has asked Congress for \$54 million for counterterrorism aid for every Central American country except Nicaragua, with El Salvador scheduled to receive almost half the money. "At a time when the guerrillas are returning to the cities, it is idiocy not to be training the police here," a senior Western diplomat said in El Salvador.

Human rights advocates vigorously oppose the request, arguing that, in Central America, police and army units have killed and tortured tens of thousands of civilians in recent years. They insist that the United States does not have the ability to change the methods of these

police forces and thus should not assist them. "The United States has a lot to lose by training police," said Aryeh Neier, vice-chairman of America's Watch, a New York-based human rights group. "We should only train police when governments have demonstrated the will to control them, which they haven't in Central America."

From 1962 to 1974, the United States Agency for International Development trained thousands of police officials. Congress ended the training after accusations of C.I.A. involvement and allegations that American-equipped policemen were responsible for torture and killings, notably in Brazil, Guatemala and Uruguay. Pat M.

Holt, who investigated these charges as an aide of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in the early 1970's, said in a recent telephone interview that he had been unable to substantiate the accusations but had found that they were widely accepted in Latin America as true. There was evidence that police forces were abusive. The public belief that Americans were involved, even if untrue, was highly damaging to the United States, Mr. Holt contends. "We transferred a lot of equipment and training to police forces in Latin America with no judicial restraint," he said. "That carried a very high political price for us because we were associated with police who had a record of brutality and cruelty."

## Prisoner Complaints

Reagan Administration officials say their new training program will aim to stop human rights abuses by professionalizing the police. That could be a lengthy and complicated task in a region where only the Costa Rican police can claim a relatively irreproachable record.

In Guatemala, police and army intelligence units have killed hundreds and perhaps thousands of civilians in recent years; torture is common. El Salvador's security forces have shown improvement, but released prisoners still complain they have been deprived of sleep and that their families have been threatened. In addition, military officers identified by American diplomats as responsible for past abuses have not been punished and been promoted, although two enlisted men were convicted last week in the 1981 killing of two American land-reform experts and a Salvadoran colleague.

The police and army in Honduras have a better record, but they are nevertheless strongly suspected of involvement in the killing and disappearance of 200 or more leftists. In Panama, the public security forces have deposed the last three presidents, and they are believed to have recently beheaded a leading opposition politician and to be deeply involved in cocaine trafficking.

Nevertheless, Congress seems disposed to consider favorably further assistance for police training in Central America, several Congressional aides say. But, they add, the program is likely to be heatedly debated.