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HONDURAS

# Unmasking the Death Squads

**T**he contras operating out of Honduras knew him as "El Chino," the Chinese, a menacing, Asian-looking man in a Honduran Army uniform who patrolled the streets of Tegucigalpa on a motorcycle. As a top operative for the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), the largest contra group fighting the Sandinista government, El Chino was theoretically responsible for counterintelligence. But apparently he was up to a lot more than spying. Officials in Honduras now suspect that El Chino, who has been asked to leave the country, used his Tegucigalpa base to mastermind the murders of the contras' enemies.

Hondurans have long suspected that the U.S.-backed contras were more than incidentally connected to the "death squads" that have harassed and killed hundreds of people inside Honduras. Though the government had never acknowledged any link, or indeed that such political violence was taking place, a confidential Honduran military report presented to President Roberto Suazo Córdova has now confirmed the public's suspicions. The study, which was leaked to reporters late last month, indicates that between 1980 and 1984, foreign agents in Honduras were responsible for more than 200 murders, kidnappings and disappearances. The surge in political violence, the study says, was "a probable result of a vendetta among . . . leftist and rightist irregulars, not Hondurans, who . . . have operated clandestinely in our territory."

According to the study, many of the victims of the exiled death squads were Salvadorans suspected of running arms between

the Sandinistas and antigovernment rebels in El Salvador. Others, including Nicaraguans and Hondurans, were marked as "spies" for Managua. "The [contras] would pick them up, question them and sometimes torture and kill them," says one Honduran military man. The probe also implicates Honduran paramilitary intelligence units and secret police in the murders or kidnappings of as many as 30 people. But justice may never be done. In most cases, the study says, the trail of evidence is now so cold that "it is impossible to verify . . . with absolute certainty the identity of those responsible" for the killings.

Political violence in Honduras escalated



*Suazo, troops: A confidential report* in 1981, at a time when the Reagan administration authorized covert CIA funding for the Nicaraguan rebels. Gen. Gustavo Alvarez Martínez, then commander of the Honduran armed forces, gave the contras sanctuary; their battle against the leftist Sandinistas suited his peculiarly rugged brand of anticommunism. Soon the troubles began. In one 1982 case, Saúl Godínez, a Honduran teachers-union activist,

was abducted by contras when he stopped for gas in a small town near the Nicaraguan border. Godínez was never seen again. "Choluteca was filled with contras then," says schoolteacher Raúl Sandoval. "They threatened our lives and accused us of being subversives and spying for the Sandinistas."

The paramilitary activity soared as the contra presence in Honduras grew. Then last March the armed forces' Supreme Council ousted General Alvarez in a barracks coup. The new military chief, Gen. Walter López, promptly ordered up the confidential report on the disappearances, and set out to tidy up the human-rights mess made by the contras. López's aims are as much political as humanitarian. In particular, he is concerned about Washington's dwindling support for the contras. His fear is that if the guerrillas lose more of their U.S. funding, their struggle against Managua might collapse, leaving Honduras infested with bands of well-armed, CIA-trained foreign bandits. "What am I going to do with 12,000 fighters here?" he asked last July.

**Weed:** In dealing with the death squads, López must also weed out the killers in his own house. Shortly after he took control of the Army, López cashiered the top leadership of the Army's Special Investigations Division, which was widely believed to have ties to paramilitary activity inside Honduras. One former commander of the division was shunted off to diplomatic duty in Mexico. At this point, a complete purge of the officers who were linked with the paramilitary groups is unlikely because firm evidence against them cannot be produced.

Despite its dramatic disclosures, so far the military's report has drawn a cool response from Honduran human-rights activists. Blaming the killings on unnamed foreigners, they say, is only a government ploy to bury its own rights violations. "This [violence] could not have happened without the knowledge and consent of the Honduran Army," says one opposition figure. "This is just an effort to improve the government's image." Another controversy has flared over just how much the United States knew about the abuses. "If the CIA did know, it is pretty damning," says a top Honduran military officer. "If they didn't, it's almost worse because it shows how little control they have over the contras." But if the killing in Honduras is to stop, someone—somehow—will have to rein them in.

JACOB YOUNG with bureau reports