

AIRGRAM

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DATE: June 15, 1968

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 DEPARTMENT OF STATE
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 JUN 18 1968

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1. Guatemalan Press Reaction to Kennedy's Death

The assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy provoked a two-stage reaction in the Guatemalan press. First came a sincere outpouring of grief and sorrow over the Senator's death, and then once these initial feelings had passed, there followed a flurry of editorials and columns lamenting and attacking what were viewed as conditions of lawlessness and turmoil in the United States, and calling for the U.S. to tend to its own problems instead of counseling the rest of the world on theirs. Several columnists saw the perpetrators of Kennedy's death as powerful U.S. economic and political interests who killed the Senator because they opposed his liberal policies. The columnists also added that just as in the cases of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, these dark forces would never be brought to justice. (UNCLASSIFIED)

COMMENT: Guatemala, with its own slew of unsolved assassinations of political figures, has been conditioned in the Latin tradition to believe that such acts must be politically motivated. Both those who looked up to the United States as well as those who dislike the U.S. found it a fine opportunity to give the United States a good whack. (~~LIMITED OFFICIAL USE~~)

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2. Judicial Organization Law Passed

On June 11 the Guatemalan Congress after a very cursory reading passed the Judicial Organization Law. (UNCLASSIFIED)

COMMENT: This law containing 216 articles is concerned primarily with improving the administration of justice, making it swifter, better controlled and more flexible. The new "Organic Law" for the Judiciary is at least a partial response to widespread criticism of the present judicial system's inadequacies, particularly with regard to political (i.e., subversive) crime.

3. Miscellany

a. Arenales Heralded as Shoo-in for President XXIII UNGA

The press reports that Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lic. Emilio ARENALES Catalán, is almost certain to become the president of the XXIII UNGA Session. The Foreign Office has apparently told the press that sixty-five countries have promised to vote for Arenales (including official pledges and other diplomatic assurances). According to Embassy count, thirty-three countries have given him official support. (UNCLASSIFIED)

b. 1968-69 Congress Opens June 15

As Congress ended its ~~XXXXXX~~ 1967-68 session, political in-fighting stalemated agreement on officers for the next session. Elections will be held at a preliminary meeting of the Congress on June 15, just prior to the ceremonial inauguration of the new session. Although PR stalwart Francisco VILLAMAR Contreras emerged as President-nominate after a heated struggle within the PR, the role of the Partido Institucional Democratico (PID) remained in doubt. In the two preceding Congresses the PID held two offices, including 1st Vice President. But defections from the PID ranks and the generally bankrupt state of the party have led to speculation that it would be omitted completely from this year's slate. Ten Independents claim to have formed a bloc and are demanding representation on the Board of Officers. (UNCLASSIFIED)

c. Arévalo an Invited Guest?

Another indication that the political climate is beginning to return to normal came from President of the Congress PREM Beteta. Prem announced that Congress would invite "all ex-Presidents of the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches to hear President Mendez' annual report on opening day of the new session. An obvious invitee is Juan José Arévalo, President of Guatemala 1946-50.

As recently as a few weeks ago the possibility of Arévalo's visit to his sick mother set off a spate of commentary and rumors. Some even attributed the President's decision to extend the state of alert for another month to his fear

of the ex-President's return (see BIWEEKA of June 1, 1968). The government now appears to have enough self-confidence to ask him back. (UNCLASSIFIED)

d. Time heals LIFE's Wounds

LIFE magazine's local distributor announced that the government had lifted its ban on distribution of LIFE EN ESPAÑOL.

This February, President Mendez forbade distribution of the weekly after it published consecutive articles mildly critical of the way his regime was handling the guerrilla problem. Apparently, pressures from distributor, company, and some members of the PR, combined with the relative peace following the command changes, caused his change of heart. (UNCLASSIFIED)

e. Diplomatic Assignments - Here Today, Gone Tomorrow

The inevitable problem of what to do with high officials ousted as part of a command change resulting from a policy change was again solved in true Guatemalan (and Latin American) fashion. Former head of the Army's capital-based counter-terror squad, Col. Maximiliano ZEPEDA Martinez, has already left for Panama where he will assume the duties of Military Attaché. And in an application for a visa to the U.S., the former Chief of Judicial Police Stuardo GARCIA Gomez indicated that he was slated to be Guatemala's next Ambassador to the Dominican Republic. (CONFIDENTIAL)

4. Internal Security

There was a slight pickup in incidents of violence with possible political overtones during the past 2 weeks, and one incident in the capital was reminiscent of the type of terrorism that the capital grew so weary of late last year and early this year. This was a widely publicized combination bombing/gunfight which occurred on June 9 in Zone 1, in which the Chief of the Second Corps of the National Police, Lt. Col. Felipe Antonio BAQUIAX, and his driver lost their lives. The two initial bombs that started the chain reaction were quite probably the work of the insurgents, but it is believed that most of the damage including the death of Baquix and his driver was done by the various elements of the security forces mistakenly firing at each other (see HGG-4770 for details). Baquix was succeeded in his post by Benedicto OSORIO Carías, formerly his second in command.

There are also reports of violence coming in from other points in the country. Another truck carrying merchandise was highjacked--this time with some Q10,000 worth of goods. It was taken on the road to San Pedro Pinula in the Department of Jalapa. Also a truck carrying National Lottery funds was robbed of some Q5,000 in the capital. There were also 3 reports of Army/insurgent clashes in the country: one near La Union, Department of Zacapa, near where the May 11 action occurred; one in Los Amates, Department of Izabal, which was a guerrilla stamping ground in 1967; and one in Chocoyoguito, near San Cristobal Verapaz, Department of Alta Verapaz. In all 2 guerrillas were reported killed, and one soldier killed and 4 wounded. Details on all encounters are sparse. (CONFIDENTIAL)

COMMENT: Since the President's March 28 decision to keep the clandestine elements in check, the country has enjoyed a period of relative peace and tranquility. This has been due in part to the reduction in violence on the part of the security forces but also to a decision on the part of the insurgents to use the period of relative quiet to regroup and consolidate. The government has met with some resistance to its policy, both from within its own ranks and from non-official militant rightists who want to keep up the pressure by any means available. It is likely that the insurgents are facing the same kinds of pressures from their more militant elements (see HGG-4762 and 4767, Secret/NoForn). The breakdown of discipline in either camp could begin an escalation process which could lead to a renewal of widespread violence sooner than anyone expects. (CONFIDENTIAL)

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