

Guatemalan talks about rights

By Kathleen Pender
For the Oregon Daily Emerald

Guatemalan President Jorge Serrano resorted to totalitarian rule because he saw democratic grassroots organization happening in the country and was concerned that government and military officials could be investigated for involvement in drug trafficking and human rights abuses, a Guatemalan human rights activist said in Eugene Saturday.

"Human rights leaders have been mobilizing, but little else is known," said Miguel Sucuqui Mejia, secretary of the Executive Board of the Runujel Junam Council of Ethnic Communities, an Indian-based organization in Guatemala that represents nine ethnic Mayan groups.

CERJ, founded in 1988 to struggle for indigenous rights and to denounce human rights violations, works to end forced participation of peasants by the military in civil defense patrols, and provides legal, medical and moral aid for refugees and people evicted from their communities.

Serrano suspended the Guatemalan Constitution, ousted the Supreme Court, cracked down on the press and assumed dictatorial power May 25.

Serrano defended his actions, deemed illegal by the Guatemalan Constitutional Court and condemned by the international community, as necessary in order to curb corruption within government ranks that was undermining his efforts to build democracy in Guatemala.

The United States, as of Saturday, canceled most economic aid to Guatemala, wire reports said.

"We knew this was going to happen. It was in the air," Mejia said, through a Spanish translator to a group of about 30 people at the Koinonia Center.

"The capital of Guatemala, Guatemala City, is militarized. There is a great list of people the government wants to capture, of rural campesino groups and human rights groups," Mejia said. "Six people were disappeared during a peaceful demonstration on May 26. As of this time, no one knows where they are or what condition they are in."

Backed by the military, Serrano placed numerous government officials and human rights activists under house arrest last week and banned all but the most heavily censored news media, wire reports said.

Noted civil rights activist Rigoberta Menchu, a recent Nobel Peace Prize laureate, called for peaceful civil disobedience before a small demonstration outside of the National Palace in Guatemala City Sunday. Protest may be limited because of fear of a bloody military crackdown.

Mejia and two other Guatemalan activists, including a traditional Mayan priest, originally came to Eugene with the purpose of sharing information about Mayan culture and religion, particularly with other Native Americans.

"To defend our culture, language, tradition, dress, etc. is central to the struggle," Mejia said.

The delegation believes that CERJ and other human rights organizations are united in Guatemala at this moment, despite the fact that the

leaders of the groups are being persecuted. Various leaders came together at the University of St. Carlos May 26, but their immediate situation is unknown, Mejia said.

CERJ is now an illegal organization in Guatemala.

"We are one of the most persecuted organizations in Guatemala," Mejia said. "Twenty-six members have been assassinated, disappeared or tortured. Even so, we've been able to make an impact on government and international human rights organizations."

The Guatemalan delegation is asking for people and organizations to help support their work and to request the safety of human rights leaders in Guatemala.

"We ask that people contact the president and the U.S. Congress and ask them to please denounce the Guatemalan government and cut off all aid," Mejia said.

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Miguel Sucuqui Mejia,
— CERJ secretary

"As you know, the U.S. government supports the Guatemalan government politically and economically. But many people don't even know that Guatemala is part of Central

America. Many people believe Guatemala is a state in Mexico," Mejia said.

Four countries are doing military training in Guatemala — Chile, Israel, Germany and the United States, Mejia said. Israel and Guatemala signed an arms agreement in January 1993, according to a Journal of Human Rights issued by five prominent human rights organizations.

In February, as many as 5,000 U.S. soldiers were sent to Guatemala under the pretext of engineering and road building. They are really helping to reinforce Guatemalan soldiers in repressing the population, Mejia said.

The United States sponsored a coup in Guatemala in 1954. Guatemala still lives under the legacy of that coup and has lived under various forms of military rule since then.

In recent years, unions, human rights groups and parts of the private sector have pushed for democracy and a transition from military to civilian rule in Guatemala.

But the military, particularly members of the officer corps, are implicated in serious human rights violations and drug trafficking, Mejia said. Further democratization could shed light on these violations, which the officer corps and their ally, Serrano, may be trying to avoid.

Serrano said he will seek election for a new legislature within 60 days.

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