

Ex-Guatemalan leader stirs controversy

by Robert Lothian

Guatemala's ex-president, General Efraim Rios Montt, appeared at the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship International Northwest Regional Convention in Portland Saturday night, May 26th.

Montt, a born-again Christian and member of the fundamentalist Protestant Church of the Word based in Eureka, California, told the sympathetic audience gathered at the Jantzen Beach Red Lion Inn that it was "God's logic" that he should come to power in a March, 1982 coup. Guatemala had been in the hands of an immoral leader General Romeo Lucas Garcia, he said. "Subversion was occupying most of my country," but the subversion was defeated during his 14-month term in office, according to Montt. "They weren't killed, the subversives," he said, "they were defeated by the spirit of the Lord."

As Montt was being introduced, a woman stepped to the microphone. "Rios Montt is responsible for the deaths of 15,000 Guatemalan peasants," she said before being whisked away. Montt stopped speaking several times as protesters from Alert Latin America and Northwest Action for Disarmament held up banners. "In the name of Christ, stop the murders!", yelled one man as he was dragged to the door. Outside, the chants and songs of protesters could be heard as they picketed at the entrance to the parking lot.

"This is just part of business," said Montt to the ruffled audience as the protesters were led out.

According to news reports and human rights organizations, up to 15,000 Guatemalans, mostly unarmed Indian civilians, were killed by Guatemalan security forces under Rios Montt and 100,000 were forced to flee to Mexico. Material handed out by the Portland Central America Solidarity Committee said that Rios Montt personally directed a massacre of peasants who staged a land takeover in 1973. According to

the Committee, Montt's mission in the U.S., where he is on a speaking tour, "is to gather support for the brutal Guatemalan military regime, using his false Christianity to appeal to the American people."

When he assumed power, Rios Montt was hailed by Reagan and his foreign policy advisors as a champion of human rights who would end the killing. His predecessor, Lucas, was responsible for the deaths of 5,000 Guatemalans during his 2½ year rule, according to Amnesty International. Lucas' methods brought international condemnation, and U.S. military aid to Guatemala was suspended.

But human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, Americas Watch, and The American Friends' Service Committee, say the killing continued under Montt, only in a more systematic way. According to AFSC, Montt brought the war against guerillas more in line with U.S. counterinsurgency strategy. Villagers were relocated to army-controlled villages, free fire zones were created and peasants were forcibly conscripted into civilian patrols used to establish loyalty and to do the army's dirty work in remote areas. Montt also suspended the constitution and established secret tribunals to try and then execute suspected guerillas.

According to Amnesty International, "Military and newly-formed 'civil defense' units destroyed entire villages, tortured and mutilated people and carried out mass executions in at least 112 separate incidents between March and July, 1982," the first five months of Rios Montt's presidency.

Saturday night, the smiling, bushy-eyed Montt was gracious as he was initiated into the "mystic order of the rose." A red rose, he said, "is like a drop of blood, the precious blood of Jesus."

Montt said his authority to rule Guatemala came from God. He was in church praying when a group of



GENERAL RIOS MONTT

(Photo: Kris Altucher)

military officers came to ask him to lead. "By the third day," after the coup, he said, "God made me the president."

Rios Montt became a Full Gospel Businessman in 1979, according to Bob Shaffer, FGBMFI Portland field representative, when Shaffer and 26 Portland businessmen flew to Guatemala City to start a chapter there. The group has seven chapters in Guatemala, nine in Costa Rica and one is being organized in Nicaragua, he said.

"We're just a group of laymen," he said. "We don't talk about those things," he said, referring to the political situation in Central America. "Our attitude is, 'Hey, let's sit down and talk about this thing.' We prayed with (Rios Montt) and have been able to share with him in his troubled times."

Shaffer said he has been to Guatemala 26 times since 1979. "A couple of presidents in those coun-

tries are friends of mine," he said.

Human rights organizations say that Guatemala uses money channelled through fundamentalist churches to buy arms from Israel and other countries. Fundamentalist preachers help with the Guatemalan Army's counterinsurgency strategy, say these organizations, when they go to Guatemala and preach to the peasants that by God's command they should obey the government.

On Sunday morning, Rios Montt delivered two sermons to the fundamentalist Neighborhood Church in Southeast Portland. "I have been to Guatemala many times... I know the country and its problems," said Neighborhood Church Rev. Gary Parker. "This man brought a dimension of morality to that country, I love him," said Parker.

As Montt prepared to speak, a woman got up and charged him with murder and then read a selection from the Bible as she was dragged out.

"Blessed is the name of the Lord," said Montt. "How marvelous it is to be a soldier of Christ."

Note: A protestor outside the Red Lion spoke with several people attending the conference. He asked what they thought about Amnesty International's projection that there are 1,000,000 displaced Guatemalans, out of a population of 7,000,000. "The guy basically said, 'If Rios Montt is spirit filled, he must be doing the right thing.' It's pretty hard to fool someone filled with the spirit. And, if he has to kill some people, that doesn't mean he is going against the Lord's will." Another explained that the conference membership didn't care one way or the other about the political implications and felt that if anyone were filled with the spirit, they would be happy...and that's all that matters.

Speakers share views of Central America

by Catherine Siegner

The Observer talked to several visiting spokespersons during Central America information week, May 7-11th. The purpose of their visits was to share personal knowledge about the area with Portland residents in order to sort out conflicting information on what's happening there.

The informational tour was sponsored by the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization in New York and the Portland-based Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon.

This week, we hear from an American lay worker with the Presbyterian Church who has visited Nicaragua as a Witness for Peace volunteer, and a Moravian Church volunteer and social services consultant who has lived among the Miskito Indians on Nicaragua's East coast.

Betsy Yeager

Betsy Yeager is a Presbyterian lay worker, musician and orchestral conductor. She is also a mother, grandmother and peace activist.

Yeager and her husband abruptly changed their lifestyle after a son was killed in an accident. They quit jobs in radio and television, sold their home in the San Francisco area and studied Spanish and "Latin

American theological thinking" in Mexico.

After a long period of living in Colombia, the Yeagers landed in New York, where Betsy Yeager works on the staff of Stony Point Conference Center, a Presbyterian facility up the Hudson River from New York City.

She went on the first long-term project of Witness for Peace, an ecumenical organization which encourages interested volunteers to visit Central America and turn their individual talents toward peaceful assistance on local problems.

Witness for Peace sponsored the hand-to-hand demonstration along the Nicaragua-Honduras border last fall.

Yeager was in a rural border town in Nicaragua from last November until January of this year. The stay sharpened her political senses and convinced her there's more potential in grassroots education on Central American issues than in lobbying politicians in Washington, D.C.

"All night long, you hear mortar fire, and in the morning, you see the results," she recalled. "Kids under 15 having amputations without so much as an aspirin because our government finds out where medicinal supplies are and bombs them."

"Illegitimate" children entitled to benefits

WASHINGTON, D.C.—"Illegitimate" (out of wedlock) children of deceased Civil Service employees or Members from throughout the country are now eligible for survivor annuity benefits on the same basis as other surviving children, as the result of a federal court decision in the District of Columbia. Hundreds of children are affected by the Court's 1978 ruling, and many of them are eligible for benefits, the amount of which will vary according to the provisions of the retirement law.

A provision of the Civil Service survivor annuity law, which restricted survivor benefits to those "illegitimate" children who were "living with" their Civil Service parent at the time of the parent's

death, has been declared unconstitutional. Judge Charles R. Richey of the District of Columbia federal district court ruled that all "illegitimate" children whose Civil Service parent died on or after February 24, 1972, are entitled to back ("retroactive") benefits which the Office of Personnel Management (formerly the Civil Service Commission) improperly denied them. They may also be entitled to future monthly benefits as well.

Persons who think they may be eligible for benefits or who know about children who may be eligible for benefits should write or call P.O. Box 16, Washington, D.C. 20004, 202-632-6853.

Yeager was able to contrast life in post-revolutionary Nicaragua with life in Chile after spending three months in Santiago earlier on. She called Chile a "repressive society," and described being roughed up by two soldiers while preaching.

"When I got home, I just couldn't walk back into my cookie-cutter house. I wanted to see what a real revolution was like." So she went to Nicaragua.

"The difference in the people is so apparent. They have socialized medicine. Every child, even in the boonies, has a fresh vaccination mark. The illiteracy rate was 70% at the end of the revolution; it's gone down to 5-8%. Our illiteracy rate here is about 17%.

"They accepted me with open joy and sharing," Yeager said. "I went to the funeral of a 14-year old soldier. His mother was crying near the open casket. She looked at me and said, 'We forgive you and the American people. We just hope President Reagan's heart will soften.'"

Yeager said many churches have written "strong letters to Reagan. All have been disregarded.... (The U.S.) is not going to win this war. The spirit of the people refuses to die."

Yeager is returning to Nicaragua this fall leading a tour of "businessmen and enlightened minorities."

"I wish everybody would go down there and see it for themselves."

Margaret Wilde

The Eastern border areas of Nicaragua have been a focus of "contra" activity since 1981. Counter-revolutionaries, mostly former military men who served under deposed dictator Anastasio Somoza or mercenaries, are trying to gain a permanent foothold in the East in order to overthrow the Sandinista government.

The reasons why the Eastern areas of Nicaragua are such fertile ground for the contras lie in historic, geographic and cultural differences between the East and West.

Margaret Wilde, a consultant for Moravian Church-sponsored social service programs, has lived and worked extensively among the

Miskito Indians and so-called "Creoles" of Nicaragua's Eastern region. She is a U.S. citizen and lives in Pennsylvania.

"There is a low range of mountains that divides Nicaragua in half," Wilde explained. "The Spanish conquest never really reached the Eastern half of the country. The Miskito fought the Spaniards off."

Centuries later, she said, when the Sandinistas were victorious in overthrowing Somoza, the legacy of ignoring the East still prevailed. The Indians, and the Creoles (English-speaking Black descendants of West Indians who migrated to Nicaragua in the 19th century) were content with being left to themselves, Wilde said. But tensions developed when the Sandinistas attempted to expand needed social services to them. The Sandinistas, although Nicaraguan, were seen as "foreigners" by the Eastern residents.

"The Western Nicaraguans are called 'Spaniards' by the Miskito," she said. "The Indians remembered fighting the Spaniards. The Westerners are Spanish-speaking Catholics. The Indians have their own languages and religions."

"The Sandinistas had policy priorities to provide social services to all the people of Nicaragua. They had health programs and literacy campaigns. And they came in with missionaries' attitudes—somewhat paternalistic and arrogant. There was a resentment (on the part of the Indians.)"

Wilde said this reaction made the Sandinistas nervous because they expected the U.S. government, through the CIA, to use the Miskito against the revolution. Therefore, while social programs continued in the East, plans to secure the zone militarily went forward.

The Sandinista's fear seemed to be justified by later events. Wilde said the CIA linked up with the contras in 1981 and established a radio station called "Radio 15th of September" just across the border in Honduras.

"They started broadcasting in Indian languages. They said the contras were going to invade Nicaragua," she said. "During 1981, border incursions had occurred, but they were haphazard and not very effective. Then, in late 1981, the sophistication of the at-

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