

MONDAY, February 18, 1985

# Guatemala saves itself

**C**an the West ever win a guerrilla war against communist rebels? Looking at the dreary record of recent years, one might well conclude that the answer is no. The daily bad news out of Central America only reinforces this impression.

In Guatemala, however, the pattern of communist success has been broken. After eight years of savage guerrilla war, the Guatemalan government is close to victory over four separate Marxist insurgent groups. The reasons for this stunning success bear examination.

Guatemala would seem the perfect environment for Marxist revolution. Rich landowners, a closed oligarchy, a majority of poor Mayan Indian peasants and little social progress. Almost a decade ago, Cuban agents began to mobilize the Indians in Guatemala's lush, volcanic mountains into guerrilla armies.

The Marxist uprising almost succeeded in overthrowing the series of military juntas that ruled Guatemala. In the war's early stages, the Guatemalan army received military aid and advice from the U.S. But as the communists went from one victory to another, young army officers decided to adopt tactics quite different from those advocated by their U.S. "counter-insurgency experts."

The results were so successful and bloody that the ever-timid President Jimmy Carter, strongly supported by liberals in Congress, cut off nearly all U.S. aid to Guatemala on grounds of human rights violations. Washington was telling Guatemala, "fight the war the same successful way that we did in Vietnam." The Guatemalans told the U.S. to keep its aid.



**JIMMY CARTER**  
Stopped U.S. aid

What the Guatemalan army did was to organize special commando units that staged counter-terror operations against Indian villages. Whenever army units were ambushed, local villagers were made to pay. Entire communities were razed and tens of thousands of civilians were killed.

As a result, civilian support for the communist rebels — who staged their own massacres — began to evaporate. The government's determination to ruthlessly punish anyone who aided the guerrillas soon deprived them of food and shelter.

The cutoff of U.S. military aid, ironically, proved the turning point in the war. Washington's refusal to send helicopters and other high-tech military gear meant that all the hallowed principles of U.S.-taught counter-insurgency could not be applied.

Instead of relying on helicopters, strike aircraft and artillery, the Guatemalan army had to go in after the rebels on foot. Accordingly, the army formed hunter-killer units that, being lightly armed, were highly mobile and effective.

These teams were sent into the mountains to hunt down the communist rebels, cut their supplies,

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destroy crops and kill anyone who aided the enemy. They would often remain for months in the mountains until they knew the terrain even better than their communist foes. No mercy was shown to prisoners.

At the same time, the army organized a million-man civil defence force. Almost every mountain village was fortified and its inhabitants armed. Rewards were offered for the heads of communist rebels; some villages were given a monthly quota. Most important, the army's roving units were never far away, ready to give aid or terrible punishment, as the case demanded.

U.S. arms supplies were quickly replaced by new weapons from Israel and a small number of Israeli advisers. U.S. Congressional liberals fumed in private but dared not say anything in public about Israel's new Central American arms market.

By 1984, the Marxist rebels had been ground down and reduced from a mortal threat into an irritant. In the process, some half million peasants are said to have died. Guatemala had become the first nation to defeat a serious communist guerrilla campaign since Malaya in the 1950s.

The lesson to be learned out of this little-publicized war is that nations seeking to stop guerrilla movements had better eschew U.S. advice and fight fire with fire. American anti-guerrilla strategy centres on using massive, high-tech firepower and aviation to replace foot soldiers. In effect, this method tries — unsuccessfully — to replace men with money.

Poor nations, like Guatemala, have the manpower and are ready to take the casualties, but not the money to afford helicopters and aircraft. This is precisely why El Salvador is slowly losing its war against communist rebels; by trying to fight a U.S.-style campaign that it cannot afford or sustain.

Guatemala was also prepared to be utterly savage and ruthless in putting down the rebellion. This is exactly why the communists are so very good at preventing revolts in their nations. Guerrilla wars entail the use of terror, torture, reprisals and indiscriminate killing. Unfortunately, the only way to oppose forces using such tactics is to use the very same methods.

Now that Guatemala has saved itself from communist rule, it is quickly evolving into a surprisingly vital democracy. By being utterly ruthless, it saved itself another decade of guerrilla war and probably another half million casualties. Victory, in our 20th-century guerrilla struggles, never goes to the faint of heart or clean of hands.

*(Eric Margolis is a member of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies)*