

Operation Guatusa-1

At the Kaibil School for Guatemalan elite forces in the heart of El Peten, less than 40 kilometers from the town of Melchor de Mencos near the border with Belize (see map, page 00), the staging area for the 450 troops deployed in Operation Guatusa-1, Colonel Castellanos pointed to a large map of El Peten, in which the area of operation, a large rectangular grid running north-south along the Belizean frontier, was highlighted with a thick black line.

"El Peten, occupying the northern one-third of Guatemala, has less than 70,000 inhabitants, out of a total population of well over 8 million Guatemalans," the colonel explained. "The area has been heavily targeted by the FAR, which openly calls for the creation of a separate pro-Moscow state. The revenues of the marijuana plantations have provided the terrorists with modern communications and transportation means, and with sophisticated arms—more modern and more sophisticated than those used by the Guatemalan army.

"Unless the dope-for-arms logistical base of the terrorists is broken now, the day may soon come—far sooner than Washington realizes—when Soviet MiGs will occupy the air base at Flores [in the north center of El Peten near a major lake], less than 30 minutes flying time from the Mexican oil fields and just over one hour from the Gulf coast of the United States.

"Operation Guatusa-1 was launched to crack the logistical base of the terrorists before the correlation of force shifts irreversibly to the side of the Soviet-sponsored narco-terrorists."

Indeed, Guatemalan military sources conceded that the lack of field communications systems, helicopter spare parts, and overland vehicles represented the greatest impediments to Operation Guatusa-1 and all military operations against the narco-terrorists. The capturing of over 40 marijuana plantations, some of which were secured with land mines installed by FAR terrorists, involved the use of rented trucks to deliver the troops into their areas of action, and the employment of machetes and hand-held saws to cut through the dense jungle, searching for the plantations. The United States has satellite infrared photography systems capable of identifying precise locations of drug fields; however, all such aid was denied to the Guatemalans.

With the first phase of the elections successfully behind, the big question in Guatemala City remains: Will the United States finally make good on its commitment to aid Guatemala in its war against narco-terrorism, a commitment most recently transmitted in a diplomatic cable to the U.S. embassy under George Shultz's signature? The answer to that question may very well determine whether the United States retains any friends at all south of the border. The alternative, as the Guatemalan military has emphasized, may mean Russian MiGs in El Peten.

Operation Guatusa-1: An EIR report

EIR correspondent Herbert Quinde filed the following report based on interviews conducted with officials of the Guatemalan Armed Forces who were directly involved in Operation Guatusa-1.

In a brilliant military offensive into the jungle state of El Peten, the 450-man battalion of Special Task Force COBRA dealt a devastating blow to the infrastructure of the Soviet and Cuban-backed narco-terrorist forces who had found a safe haven in the thick jungles of northern Guatemala.

Codenamed *Operation Guatusa-1*, the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Republic of Guatemala, under the direction of Gen. Lobos Zamora, ordered four companies and one platoon from the elite Kaibil Special Forces School into an area of operation next to the border with Belize. It had been more than one year's time since there was been a military presence in the area. Guatemala's military G-2 (Intelligence) had gathered information indicating that the area south of Melchor de Mencos along the Belize border and west to Dolores was inundated with marijuana plantations.

The mission orders, made explicit to each unit commander and soldier, were to seek out, capture, and destroy marijuana plantations; to hunt down and capture narcotics traffickers and terrorists, and to gather additional evidence substantiating the deep ties between the narcotics mafia and the FAR (Fuerzas Armadas en Rebelde).

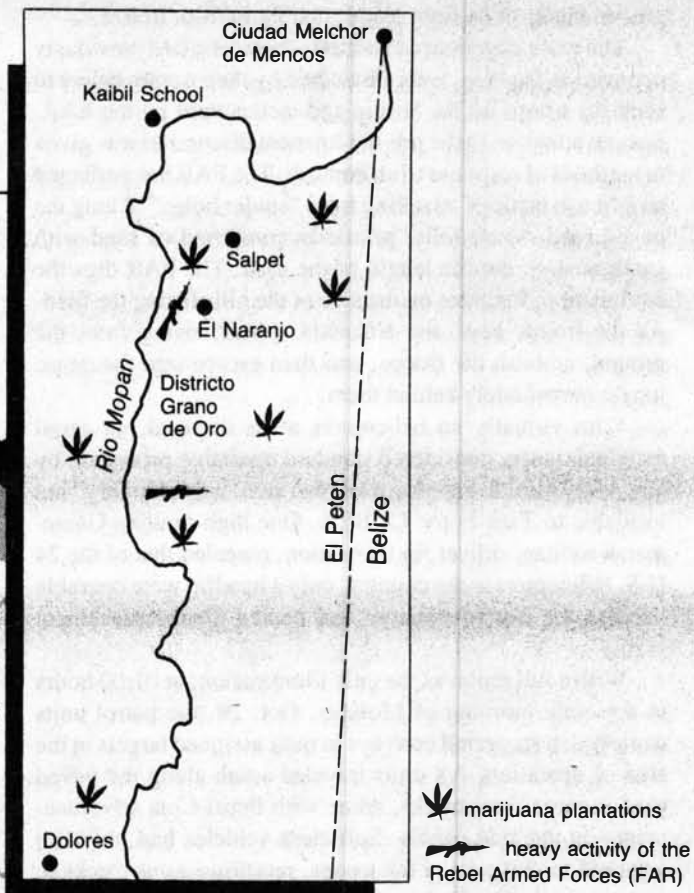
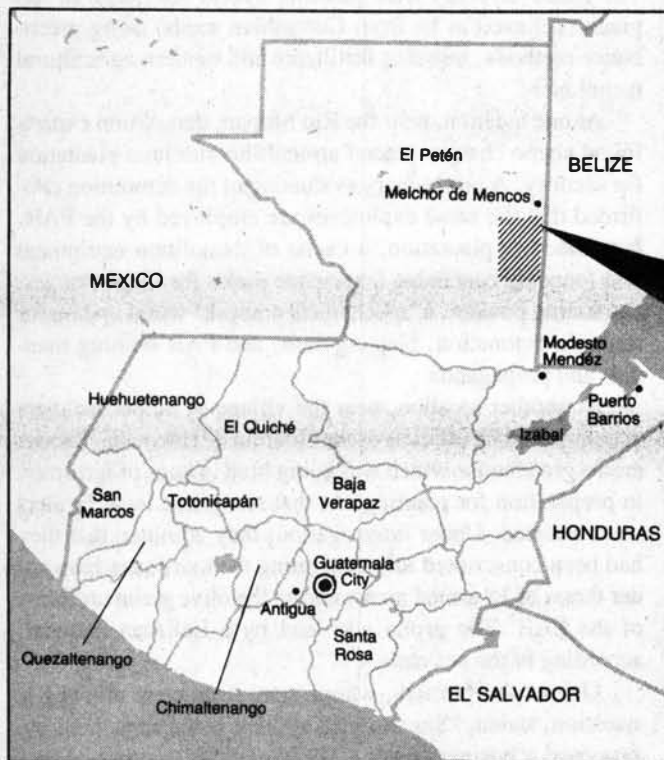
In the end, over 40 marijuana plantations were found and destroyed, with crops estimated at \$30 million. Demolition equipment used by the FAR was found near the plantations, including some explosives planted as perimeter security around the fields. Twelve prisoners were taken, from whom new information confirmed that Operation Guatusa-1 had struck a key center of the international arms-for-drugs network.

Phase 1

Operation Guatusa-1 was divided into into phases of operation.

Phase 1, in many ways, was the most difficult to complete. The different units, platoons, and companies that com-

Guatemala's war on the drug plantations



posed Task Force COBRA were spread throughout the state of El Petén. They had to be brought to a central staging area near the Kaibil Special Forces School to receive their instructions.

What might seem like a simple enough task was a major logistical challenge. First, there is virtually no radio communications grid to speak of. No secured radio transmissions lines existed between the General Staff headquarters in Guatemala City and detachments in El Petén. The FAR, on the other hand, has an extensive radio communications grid and courier network that dots the entire state.

To gain as much advantage with the element of surprise as possible, concentration of troops and their redeployment to the targeted areas had to be done with maximum speed. Traveling at night was optimal to avoid alerting the support apparatus of the FAR in the towns that would have to be traveled through.

The second logistical constraint was vehicles to transport the troops. No one company in the battalion had enough trucks to move its troops to the staging area. After each detachment received its order to move to the staging area, the commander of the detachment had to negotiate with the local

farmers to rent their trucks to move the troops.

Ironically, in some cases, the trucks rented were the same used by the narco-terrorists to transport bales of marijuana across the Belize border.

The detachments that were incorporated into COBRA based in Poptun, to the south of Dolores, had the most difficult task in reaching the staging area. They had an eight-hour trip, traveling north to the east of Dolores, so as to avoid passing through the area of operation which would have set off alarms for the FAR cells in the region.

Phase II

Despite such major logistical impediments, the result of the Carter administration's equipment-embargo, all detachments had reached the Kaibil Special Forces School by early Sunday evening, Oct. 27.

The unit commanders coordinated plans with the officials of the Guardia de Hacienda, who provided guides that could lead and maneuver the troops through the dense jungle. The information gathered by G-2 indicated that some plantations were as much as 20 kilometers off the only paved road, which traversed the area north to south. Processed marijuana is

moved out of these plantations, protected by the thick jungle, on mules or by light planes that fly in from Belize.

The more experienced soldiers, those who had previously operated in the area, were instructed by their commanders to brief the troops on the terrain and tactics used by the FAR. Special attention in the pre-deployment discussion was given to methods of response to an ambush. The FAR has perfected an ambush tactic of attacking from "spider holes." Along the paved road, small hills, primarily composed of sand with small bushes, dot the length of the road. The FAR digs the equivalent of foxholes on the side of the hills facing the road. As the troops pass, the terrorists appear, rising from the ground, ambush the troops, and then escape into the dense jungle immediately behind them.

With virtually no helicopters at its disposal, an aerial reconnaissance, considered standard operating procedure by any Army prior to entering a combat area, was a "luxury" not available to Task Force COBRA. One high-ranking Guatemalan military officer, in frustration, revealed that of the 24 U.S. helicopters in the country, only a handful were operable because the Carter embargo had denied them replacement parts.

With a full moon as the only illumination, at 01:00 hours in the early morning of Monday, Oct. 28, the patrol units deployed in staggered convoys to their assigned targets in the area of operation. All units traveled south along the paved road in large farm trucks, some with Pepsi-Cola advertisements on the side panels. Sufficient vehicles had not been acquired to move all of the troops, requiring some trucks to make two trips to deploy all units to their designated target areas.

By daybreak, the patrols were no longer visible on the road. Moving through the thick vegetation, they averaged 1/2 kilometer an hour, hacking through the jungle with machetes and chainsaws.

By late Monday evening, the first reports by radio reached the Command Post (CP), which was secured in an area just outside the hamlet of Salpet.

The few radios that were available for the operation had been obtained through a nationwide effort of the Army by pooling resources to facilitate the success of the mission.

One story, characteristic of the innovative "can-do" determination of the Guatemalan Armed Forces, revolved around a radio-communications problem. A young lieutenant, commanding a patrol outside of Dolores, had not only found numbers of marijuana plantations, but, dressed in civilian clothes, had managed to get the names of the seven owners of the plantations and taken them prisoner. He had found several bales of processed marijuana, ready for shipment, including two bales in the home of one of the prisoners.

The lieutenant now needed back-up to secure the rest of the area and intelligence support to interrogate the prisoners to exploit his find. But the Israeli-made radio he had could not make contact with the Command Post. His only alterna-

tive was to travel back to the CP. He hired a local framer who had a pick-up truck. Still dressed in civilian clothes, so as not to attract attention, he traveled 7½ hours to make his report.

By late Tuesday, Oct. 29, over 40 plantations, averaging 100 meters by 100 meters, had been located and secured. The Army unearthed a sophisticated production apparatus: The narco-terrorists were planting hybrid marijuana of top grade (believed to be from Colombian seeds) using greenhouse methods, utilizing fertilizers and modern agricultural techniques.

At one location, near the Rio Mopan, demolition experts found shape charges placed around the marijuana plantation for security. A preliminary evaluation of the demolition confirmed that the same explosives are employed by the FAR. Near another plantation, a cache of demolition equipment was found containing homemade molds for shape charges, detonating powder, a "mechanical ambush" wired system for multiple detonation, blasting caps, and FAR training manuals and propaganda.

At another location, near the village of Salpet, soldiers accompanied by officials of the Guardia de Hacienda, uncovered a greenhouse which was being bred in bags of fertilizer, in preparation for planting. At that site, three local farmers were arrested. Under interrogation, they admitted that they had been conscripted into cultivating the marijuana crop under threat of 15 armed men wearing the olive green uniforms of the FAR. The group was led by a Belizean national, according to the peasants.

One of the farmers, whom journalists were allowed to question, stated, "Several men in olive green came here and proposed a business deal: I would plant this crop, and they would pay me. They told me not to ask questions, because they weren't there to give explanations, only seeds. . . . They warned me that if I told anyone, I would pay the consequences."

The farmer also said that one of the narco-terrorists indicated that they need not fear the government authorities, because the police and army were in no position to police the area.

According to Colonel Castellanos, the information provided by the farmers confirmed other reports of a dozen FAR cells operating with impunity across the Guatemala border inside Belize, as the "logistics command" for the guns-for-pot trade believed to be the primary source of arms for the FAR in EL Peten.

Phase III

The concluding phase of Operation Guatusa-1 involved exploiting the information gained through the operation, and redeploying the manpower to secure the national elections from terrorist disruptions. As the commander of Task Force COBRA, rightfully pleased with his success, stated: "This is just the beginning. If we can muster the equipment, there will be two, three, four, many *Guatusas*."