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The New York Times

August 4, 2007 Saturday
Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section A; Column 0; Foreign Desk; Pg. 1

LENGTH: 1476 words

HEADLINE: Drug Gangs Use Violence to Sway Guatemala Vote

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DATELINE: GUATEMALA CITY

BODY:

It is election time in Guatemala and that means rallies and banners -- and body bags.

In the campaigning leading up to elections on Sept. 9, the authorities have reported 61 violent attacks on candidates and political activists. The death toll is 26, including seven national congressmen and numerous other office seekers.

The flurry of bullets, and the occasional machete attack, make this the bloodiest campaign season in the history of a country with a long tradition of political violence, including 36 years of civil war that ended in 1996. But what makes the bloodletting different this time is that it has been attributed to narcotics traffickers and their allies intent on infiltrating Guatemala's political system.

So dangerous is campaigning that Alvaro Colom, the leading presidential candidate, flies in a helicopter to avoid being ambushed and travels with a physician with extensive experience in bullet wounds. He is careful what he eats, lest someone poison it. "I hate to say this, but it's more violent now than during the war," he said.

It is not only South America's drug-producing countries that are at risk these days from the impact of the drug trade, or even of becoming narcostates. More and more, corrosive effects are being felt in the countries where the drugs transit, like Guatemala, Mexico and Haiti, as competition grows, in effect, to set up toll roads on the drug routes to the United States.

Somewhere between 60 and 90 percent of the South American cocaine that enters the United States now comes through Central America, American officials say, pulling rising levels of political instability, violence and corruption in its wake.

The most popular trafficking routes shift constantly to stay one step ahead of law enforcement efforts, the officials say. "If you attack the cockroach in one corner, the son of a gun shows up in another," said a senior American counternarcotics official in the region, who spoke on background to avoid compromising future investigations.

Cartels active in Colombia, where much of the region's cocaine is produced, have connections with politicians, military officers and others throughout the area to assist them in getting drugs and drug profits out, whether on small

planes or boats.

Guatemala provides an increasingly important transit point, American officials say, as traffickers take advantage of the country's dire poverty and lawlessness. They have already made considerable progress over the years, political analysts and law enforcement officials say, by installing sympathetic politicians in Congress and in local city halls.

"Controlling the political system is their goal," said Iduvina Hernandez, an analyst at a Guatemalan research group called Security in Democracy. "If they can control a small town, they can build a landing strip there and use it as a base. If they have someone in Congress, all the better."

With plenty of money to spend, drug dealers finance as many campaigns as they can and put forward candidates who are on the take. Resistance is met with gunfire.

Jose Carlos Marroquin, Mr. Colom's chief strategist, might have joined the list of victims as well. Last year, as campaigning got under way, assailants lobbed three grenades at his motorcade and opened fire on the vehicles with automatic weapons. He survived but the threats against him and his family have not let up.

"Politics is dangerous here," said Mr. Marroquin, a former newspaper editor. "Along with the regular campaigns, there is a campaign of fear."

In addition to the traffickers, an array of other heavily armed groups, including rogue soldiers, paramilitary groups, street gangs and smugglers, are fueling the violence. None of them are trigger shy.

Street violence is part of life in Guatemala even when an election is not around the corner. People are shot by muggers, caught in the cross fire of rival gangs and taken out by hit men as a matter of course.

Campaign season brings a spike in the killing, although homicides are only rarely solved here and political crime is no exception. [Guatemala's Congress voted Aug. 1 to approve an initiative backed by President Oscar Berger's administration that would allow United Nations investigators to aid in the prosecution of armed groups. It is being called the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala.]

In one example of how hard it is to crack a case here, three Salvadoran members of the Central American Parliament and their driver were murdered in Guatemala in February. The suspected killers, four police officers, were themselves later murdered in prison. A police officer and five men with links to a drug cartel have been arrested, although the motive for the attacks and counterattacks remains unknown. Mr. Berger's security minister resigned in the wake of the killings.

The effect of all the violence on the candidates is profound. They move around with their own private armies, usually in bullet-proof vehicles loaded with small arsenals.

One of those who feel most vulnerable is Mr. Colom, a businessman who is leading the pack in the presidential race. People affiliated with his party have suffered more attacks, 16 of the 61, than any other.

Besides the recent attacks on members of his party, he is haunted by the past. His uncle, Manuel Colom Argueta, was a leading presidential candidate in 1979, when he was gunned down.

One candidate forced out of Mr. Colom's National Unity for Hope party in 2005 was Manuel de Jesus Castillo, a congressman who has been accused but never convicted of links to drug interests.

He is running for mayor of the provincial town of Jutiapa as an independent. It is a campaign he is expected to win, largely because of his precampaign giveaways of everything from farming tools to livestock. The raffles he sponsors even offer free plots of land to lucky residents -- but only if he wins.

"I'm clean, and it's a lie what they say about me," Mr. Castillo, who has formed his own civic organization called El Castillo, or the Castle, has told reporters. He travels his rural district in a yellow Hummer and has burly men nearby to protect him.

With the murder rate at roughly 6,000 deaths a year, it is not hard to understand why security has emerged as the chief issue of the campaign.

"There are presidential candidates who are trying to scare the people," Mr. Colom said the other day, an indirect attack at Otto Perez Molina, a tough-talking former general who is considered to be No. 2 in the polls. "We have a plan to bring security but also health and education and jobs."

Mr. Perez Molina's campaign symbol is a fist. He is all about "mano dura," or "strong hand," his shorthand for a no-holds-barred crackdown on delinquency. The tough message has appeal among crime-weary Guatemalans, who were shown in a recent survey to back extreme methods, even vigilantism, to cut the country's murder rate.

The population applauded Alejandro Giammattei, a former director of prisons and the candidate of the ruling party, when he ordered a raid on a notorious prison last year that had become a center for organized crime. Subsequently, gunmen tried to end his life, Mr. Giammattei said.

After that, Guatemala's top human rights official said there was evidence that the police had shot and killed seven prisoners after they had been detained in the raid. Mr. Giammattei denied that account, although public sympathy for the prisoners who were killed has been minimal.

Even the candidacy of Efraim Rios Montt, a former dictator who is running for a congressional seat, has not prompted much of an uproar here. Mr. Rios Montt is expected to win a seat, which will make it harder to prosecute him on charges of violating human rights during the country's long civil war.

In April, 31 members of the United States Congress sent a letter to Guatemala's attorney general calling for the immediate arrest of Mr. Rios Montt, who ruled the country from 1982 to 1983, which was considered the bloodiest period of the civil war.

Warrants for Mr. Rios Montt's arrest, issued by a Spanish judge, stem from complaints filed by another presidential candidate, Rigoberta Menchu, winner of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize for her work on behalf of Guatemala's marginalized indigenous communities, which bore the brunt of the violence during the war.

With little in the way of resources, her campaign is struggling, despite its message of breaking with the country's violent past. A Quiche Indian, she would be the first woman and the first indigenous person to serve as president.

As a symbol of the peace he wants, Mr. Colom, who is in his third bid for the presidency, threw a dove in the air at a recent campaign rally. It went up for a moment, its wings flapping furiously, then quickly plummeted to the ground.

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GRAPHIC: Photo: Alvaro Colom, left, a presidential candidate, flies in a helicopter to avoid being ambushed and travels with a doctor with extensive experience in bullet wounds. He is careful what he eats, lest someone poison it. (Photograph by Orlando Sierra/Agence France-Presse)(pg. A5)

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