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ACTION WHA-00

INFO	LOG-00	VCI-00	AID-00	A-00	ACQ-00	CCO-00	COME-00
	DODE-00	PERC-00	DS-00	AVC-00	OBO-00	H-00	TEDE-00
	INR-00	AGRE-01	L-00	CAC-00	MFLO-00	MMP-00	MOFM-00
	MOF-00	M-00	VCIE-00	DCP-00	NSAE-00	ISN-00	OCS-00
	OMB-00	OPR-00	PA-00	PC-00	PM-00	PRS-00	P-00
	SCT-00	ISNE-00	SP-00	IRM-00	SSO-00	SS-00	TRSE-00
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FM AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3667

INFO WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC

CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL

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RELEASED IN PART
B6, B1, 1.4(B), 1.4(D), B7(E)

S E C R E T GUATEMALA 000077

NOFORN

E.O. 13526: DECL: 2021/05/20

TAGS: AEMR, ASEC, EAID, PGOV, CASC, MARR, SNAR, GT

SUBJECT: Guatemala Declares "State of Siege" in Peten Following
Decapitation of 27 People

REF: A) 10 GUATEMALA 1764; B) GUATEMALA 480; C) GUATEMALA 49;
D) 10 GUATEMALA 349; E) GUATEMALA 69;

CLASSIFIED BY: Stephen G. McFarland, Ambassador, DOS, EXEC; REASON:
1.4(B), (D)

1. (SBU) Summary: On May 16, President Alvaro Colom declared a "state of siege" for the northern department of Peten for 30 days following the discovery of 27 decapitated people at a ranch on May 15. While it is not yet clear who is responsible for these crimes, authorities agree that witness statements and evidence left at the scene point toward the Los Zetas drug cartel. All USG agencies stand ready to assist the Government of Guatemala (GOG) in its investigation; NAS helicopters have already transported prosecutors and equipment to the crime scene and GOG agencies are jointly coordinating operations and checkpoints. The massacre follows a week of extreme violence throughout Guatemala and it is not yet clear which of these incidents may be interconnected. We have

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taken all appropriate measures to alert Embassy personnel and U.S. citizens in country to exercise extreme caution when travelling in Peten. Media outlets widely condemned the heinous murders and most analysts believe this marks a new level of violence for Guatemala.

2. (S/NF) Summary, continued.

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End Summary.

Peten Massacre

3. (SBU) On May 16, in a televised address, President Alvaro Colom declared a "state of siege" for the northern department of Peten following the gruesome discovery of 27 decapitated people at the privately-owned "Los Cocos" ranch on May 15. (Note: The ranch is located approximately 87 miles to the west of Flores, the department capital.) The perpetrators of the massacre are believed to be associated with the Los Zetas drug cartel based in Mexico. Twenty-five men and two women were murdered; those who have been identified so far ranged in age from 13 to 44. They appear to be seasonal workers hired from the eastern Izabal and Zacapa departments to work at the ranch. Surviving witnesses reported that on May 15, in the early morning, 50 armed, uniformed men entered the ranch in 12 vehicles and gathered all ranch employees together. They demanded that the workers reveal the location of the owner, [redacted] but the workers did not provide this information. (Note: DEA describes [redacted] as a low- to mid-ranking drug trafficker.) The men then began to kill and dismember the workers removing the heads of most victims and carving the letter "Z" into the torso of some. Body parts were scattered around the ranch in different locations and a message was painted in blood on a wall: "What are you doing, [redacted] I'm going to find you and I'm going to leave you like this."

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4. (SBU) There are several plausible theories circulating which seek to explain the motive behind the massacre: 1) The Los Zetas cartel is trying to fill the power vacuum left in Guatemala following the arrest of major narcotraffickers (Ramirez (ref A), Chamale (ref B), and Lorenzana (ref C)), and considering that

[redacted] land is located on a strategic drug-trafficking route, the massacre was a message that the Los Zetas are moving in to take control of key areas in Peten; 2) The killing was revenge for [redacted] attempts to increase his standing in the narco-community; 3) [redacted] was involved in a business deal with Los Zetas and possibly betrayed them; and 4) [redacted] refused to cooperate with the Los Zetas cartel and the massacre was meant to make him aware, and possibly others, of the cost of not working with them. Since the investigation is still in its initial stages, it is not yet clear what the motive was behind the killings and which of these theories may be correct.

USG Assistance

5. (C) [redacted] B1
[redacted] (Note: "Los Cocos" ranch is 354 miles from Guatemala City and it would take approximately eight hours to travel there by car.)

[redacted] B1
The Public Ministry (MP, or Attorney General's Office) and the Ministry of Defense reported that coordination is good between the Ministry of Government, Ministry of Defense, the MP, and the Supreme Court. The Senior Defense Official/Defense Attache (SDO/DATT) also travelled to Flores, Peten to assess the Guatemalan government response.

6. (C) A USG inter-agency team met on May 17 to discuss ways to assist the Government of Guatemala (GOG). [redacted] B1

[redacted] MILGRP's Information Officer offered to assist with the GOG's public information campaign. [redacted] B1

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Next Steps

7. (SBU) As of May 17, [REDACTED]

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The Supreme

Court has also assigned a liaison to assist with processing warrants.

8. (S/NF) The "state of siege" will last for 30 days, according to the GOG decree ratified by Congress on May 17. However, all election-related events and religious, sports, and cultural events will be permitted to continue. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] had initially complained that a "state of siege" would limit electoral activities that should be able to take place freely. End Note.) Other rights will be suspended. For example, police will be able to make warrantless arrests and may hold detainees for more than the constitutionally-mandated six hour timeframe before the individual must be arraigned. During the "state of siege" declared in Coban, Alta Verapaz from December 19, 2010 to February 19, 2011 (ref D), rights were theoretically suspended as well, but these restrictions were not applied in practice. The military played a supportive role and prosecutors and police requested warrants before conducting searches. [REDACTED]

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Brazen Violence on the Rise

9. (SBU) The Peten massacre took place during an especially violent period throughout Guatemala:

On May 2, there was a shootout on the CA13 highway just south of Poptun, Peten. The PNC had been dispatched to investigate an attempted kidnapping when they were shot at by alleged narcotraffickers. The assailants fled, but the PNC seized eight AK-47s, a rifle, munitions, bulletproof vests, four radios, and a military-style helmet.

On May 10, [redacted] was kidnapped while in Peten on business. [redacted] B6

[redacted] put together 250,000 Quetzales (approximately \$32,905) as the payment for his release and travelled to personally deliver the money. On May 12, [redacted] head was found in Peten. On May 13, the bodies of [redacted] and [redacted] were found. [redacted] is the [redacted] of [redacted] the owner of "Los Cocos" ranch. B6

On May 11, an armed group, which the press alleged to be Los Zetas, killed [redacted] in the southeastern department of Jutiapa. [redacted] B6

On May 13, five people were killed and several people were injured while traveling on a bus from Quetzaltenango to Guatemala City at 7:30 a.m. Press reports indicate that armed men boarded the bus and began taking valuables from passengers. Differing accounts suggest that the thieves began indiscriminately shooting at passengers, or that one passenger, who was himself armed, resisted the thieves' demands and fired his gun which led to a firefight and the deaths of other passengers.

On May 14, Haroldo Waldemar Leon Lara, an alleged narcotrafficker and the brother of narcotrafficker Juan ("Juancho") Leon Lara who was murdered in Zacapa in March 2008, was killed in

San Jose, Peten.

On May 16, in Santa Elena, near Flores in Peten, an armed group believed to be Los Zetas attacked a school, a restaurant, and a store with explosives. A firefight later broke out between police and the alleged Zetas in the center of town. During the shootout, [redacted] B6

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reported that the shooting was taking place a block and a half away from its offices in Santa Elena. Rainforest Alliance also noted that CONAP (National Council for Protected Areas) had received a bomb threat. UNCLASSIFIED

10. (SBU) On May 17, GOG authorities arrested Hugo Alvaro Gomez Vasquez, a former military sergeant whom they believe to be linked to the kidnapping and eventual murder of Luis Carlos Bardales Chacon as well as the murders of his father and wife. GOG authorities theorize that all three were kidnapped by the Los Zetas cartel and that Salguero was being extorted to pay a ransom or that he owed the Los Zetas cartel money for drugs. Salguero's failure to pay may have resulted in their three deaths and may also have led to the Peten massacre on May 15. GOG authorities are still investigating. To date, the PNC seized three vehicles believed to have been used in the massacre, three kilos of cocaine, 150,000 Quetzales in cash (approximately \$19,740), bulletproof vests, and firearms, and identified a camp site used by the assailants in the jungle.

Media Reaction

11. (SBU) Initial reaction to the massacre in the media was unanimous in condemning the wanton violence and brutality of the attack, agreeing it marks a new low in a country already viewed as one of the most violent in the region, and is symptomatic of larger problems ailing Guatemala. Some columnists assert that with this massacre the Zetas are sending the clear message that they are a "force to be reckoned with" and are "here to stay." In reference to the U.S., leading daily Prensa Libre carried Ambassador McFarland's statement and condolences after the attack, while its lead editorial proclaimed that the scourge will continue until the U.S., as "the largest consumer market of narcotics," decides to penalize consumption as well as distribution of drugs, calling for international efforts to address the problem. While conservative business daily Siglo21 (on May 17) posited the negative effect the massacre will have on foreign investment and tourism, it joined several others on May 18 in pointing fingers at U.S. training of Mexican and Guatemalan special forces, making them attractive recruits for drug-trafficking organizations. (Comment: We have no information that U.S.-trained Mexican or Guatemalan special forces were involved in this incident. In fact, GOG authorities are extensively using police and military special forces to conduct operations against criminal groups in Peten. End Comment.)

Embassy Security Posture

12. (SBU) The Consular Section issued a warden message on May 16 alerting U.S. citizens to the Peten massacre and urging them not to conduct any unnecessary travel and then sent another message on May

17, to inform about the declaration of the "state of siege" in Peten. One hundred twelve American citizens residing in Peten are registered with the Consular Section. The vast majority live in Flores/Santa Elena and Sayaxche. There were no reported injuries associated with the Peten massacre or the Santa Elena firefight. The Regional Security Office (RSO) also sent out a security notice on May 17 to all Embassy personnel urging them to exercise extreme caution when traveling in the Peten. Peace Corps has placed the Peten (where there are no PCVs) off-limits. In addition, all in-country travel by Embassy personnel (both personal and official) is reviewed by the RSO.

Comment

13. (S/NF) Peten is the largest department in Guatemala that contains vast amounts of forests and farms with minimal government presence. Previous incidents of narcotraffickers operating with impunity there, including intimidating and coercing local residents into cooperating with them,

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While it is still not clear who committed these horrific acts, the grotesque nature of the killings is distinct from the rampant violent crime that has typically dominated Guatemala and is consistent with what we understand is the Los Zetas cartel's modus operandi.

14. (C)

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[REDACTED]

15. (S/NF) Given the GOG's previous experience with the "state of siege" and early reports that cooperation among GOG agencies in Peten is working well, we are hopeful the GOG will be able to arrest some of the perpetrators of this massacre. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

End Comment.
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