

PLANNING AN ABDUCTION

It happened in 1983, I don't remember the month. The abduction took place at 2:00 in the afternoon, in broad daylight. I don't remember his name. They just said, "Look, that's him." They don't tell you the name, they just point the person out. Not until you are going to take him, to kill him, that's when you find out who it is that's behind bars.

"Abducted" means that you take someone unexpectedly during the night—detained—the G-2 rarely detains, it only abducts, so that no one knows who did it. Unexpectedly at night they take the person, naked, without a nightshirt or underwear. You break down the door and take the person, and you shove him into the car and goodbye. Then you leave and that's it. Case 1741 (perpetrator), Izabal, 1980-83.

Victims of abduction frequently disappeared. According to the testimonies, six out of ten people abducted have still not reappeared. A minority of victims reappeared alive (14 percent). One out of every three abduction victims was found dead, often bearing signs of torture. Many illegal (or irregular) detentions, which are not included in these figures, may also be considered abductions (10 percent of the cases compiled). This illustrates the frequency with which abductions were used to intimidate or eliminate victims.

SHORT-TERM ABDUCTION OR DETENTION

Intelligence organizations used brutal tactics like short-term abduction or detention for propaganda purposes and, unlike cases of forced disappearance, the victim was not killed.

If the purpose of the abduction was to induce collaboration, torture and threats were used to elicit information and break the victims' spirit. Accordingly, the treatment received varied depending on whether the victim agreed to collaborate. Victims who agreed to the offer were immediately treated more humanely and received good food, clothing, and cigarettes. During the next stage, the captors manipulated their victims' emotions in order to achieve psychological control over them. The victim was required to contact his or her family, for which the captors supervised temporary departures from the detention center. The captors would also give money to the family if it was having financial troubles. This served a dual purpose: on the one hand, there was the threat that the victim's family would be detained and killed. On the other was the threat that the detainee would be killed, even as the family became financially dependent on the intelligence services. The goal was to extend the detention center's influence, and the effects of psychological torture, to the entire family group. The technique was so effective that the intelligence apparatus came to rely on it heavily.

Staged Confessions: Publicity

Maritza Urrutia, a thirty-three-year-old Guatemalan teacher, was abducted on July 22, 1992, by a Presidential General Staff (EMP) commando. She was subsequently detained for one week at a Mobile Military Police (PMA) station in Guatemala City. She was abducted because of her affiliation with the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP). From the outset, her captors' behavior, and the treatment she received, focused on breaking down her resistance and eliciting information. But her detention was also a publicity stunt to discredit the guerrillas and enhance the government's credibility at a time when the latter was facing accusations of human rights violations in the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva.

Torture

Maritza was subjected to various forms of torture: she was interrogated repeatedly while in a weakened state and sometimes videotaped. She was psychologically manipulated by her captors; she was drugged during interrogations; she was humiliated and attacked in intimate ways; she was exposed to constant noise and light, and deprived of sleep; her life and the life of her four-year-old son were threatened. Throughout her detention, except when she was being videotaped, she was forced to wear a hood made from newspaper over her face. She was handcuffed the entire time. And finally, she was continually pressured to admit publicly her affiliation with the EGP and request amnesty.

"Your son is fine. Someone is taking care of him. He is eating cookies. He's fine," he told me. I was terrified and extremely worried about my little son. I thought I was going to have a nervous breakdown from the worry. They showed me horrible photographs of dead bodies. The corpses had been tortured and mutilated. The photographs were horrific, and they completely unnerved me. They told me the same thing could happen to me if I didn't cooperate with them.

They took me to a public telephone, and they made me call my parents to tell them not to worry about me. Afterward, the interrogation lasted until 4:00 A.M. I was extremely nervous, exhausted, and afraid. They brought a portable radio to the room and turned it up full blast. They left the light on, and I was handcuffed to the bed, alternating hands, and I always had to keep the newspaper hood over my head.

The interrogation lasted for hours. Around 5:00 P.M. the light-skinned man said they were going to bring another man who would not treat me so kindly. I was exhausted and nervous, and I was shaking a lot, and I yelled for them to please not bring the other man. I started to beg them not to hurt me. I told them I would cooperate.

He said they wanted me to go to Geneva to speak in favor of the government before the United Nations Human Rights Commission. I was to thank the many people who had taken an interest in me, like General Carlos Arana Osorio, the defense minister, General García Samayoa, and others. I had to

say that I went to Mexico in 1986, that my husband was a member of the EGP, and that I had worked for the organization. They wanted me to give the names of certain people, say that I was sorry to have caused my family so much worry, but that I wanted to leave the EGP organization, and that I had gone away for a time to "legalize" my situation. I was to ask forgiveness of the organization and say that I wanted to leave it in order to end this struggle that had caused so much harm to my country. I was to end my statement by asking the army for amnesty and protection for myself.

Even as they were torturing her, her captors tried to keep up her physical appearance; they eventually gave her a day and a half of rest after the first videotapes did not come out well. They bought her makeup and toiletries for the sessions, which took place over several days.

I put on a lot of makeup. I did it so that if people who knew me saw the video, they would realize that something was wrong and that I hadn't made the tape voluntarily.

From that time on, her captivity consisted of endless taping sessions with variations of the message: (1) add a part in which she also would thank the Archdiocesan Human Rights Office and the U.S. Embassy; (2) then, add a part where she would thank Otto Peralta, president of the Association of University Students (AEU) of San Carlos University, and take out the part where she thanks the military; (3) eliminate the reference to amnesty and gratitude to the army and, again, refer to Otto Peralta and the history department of the university, and add a part where she asks her comrades to abandon the struggle.

"When you say in the video that you don't want to belong to the organization anymore, you have to say it like you really mean it. It seems like it troubles you to leave the organization, like what you're saying isn't true," he would say. They told me I should smile when I spoke.

The light-skinned man¹² took me to the telephone. He told me to call Teleprensa first. I said, "I'm Maritza Urrutia. I would like you to include in your program tonight a video that some friends of mine delivered to you." Then we called Notisiete [News Seven] and I said the same thing.

The light-skinned man gave me detailed instructions. They were the conditions for my freedom: request amnesty; hold a press conference in which I tell the defense minister that I want to cooperate with the army, that perhaps I could go to Geneva and speak at the United Nations on the army's behalf.

The next day she was taken to a meeting with the state attorney, Acisclo Valladares, who expedited the amnesty process, even changing the dates she had

¹² In a subsequent investigation, the "light-skinned man" was identified as Captain Eloy Ovalle Vargas. This was confirmed by a key witness who participated in the operation.

belonged to the organization to facilitate her request (it should have been prior to 1988). At no time did he ask where she had been for the past week, whether she had been involuntarily detained, or how she had been treated. Neither Valladares, nor the judge who granted her amnesty, asked if she had been forced into it or commented on her deteriorated physical condition a week into her kidnapping.

Despite the fact that she was still threatened and under surveillance, Maritza Urrutia decided not to follow her captors' instructions. On September 30, 1992, she testified in Washington, D.C., before the Inter-American Human Rights Commission of the OAS.

I feel fortunate to have survived this trial. I have the good fortune to be alive. I cannot help but think of the many other Guatemalans who have not been so lucky...

For the thousands of people who have been disappeared, tortured, and murdered by the Guatemalan army, for the political convictions for which I was kidnapped, for all the Guatemalans who mobilized to secure my release, members of the academic community, religious sectors, displaced persons, human rights activists, parents, brothers and sisters, relatives, and other loved ones; for the international figures and institutions who pressured the government for my release; for the future of my son and of all Guatemalan children; and, for myself, I made the decision to continue to denounce the outrages that the army has committed with impunity for the past thirty years. ODHAG case 001, Guatemala, 1992.

FORCED DISAPPEARANCES: A SMOKE SCREEN

Forced disappearance has been one of the barbaric, selective methods most frequently used by Guatemalan intelligence. It was used on a mass scale during certain periods of the armed conflict. Forced disappearance accounts for one out of every five cases reported in the testimonies. Most of these victims were seized suddenly during a covert action and were never heard from again. Forced disappearance gives rise to tremendous uncertainty over the fate of the victims and their physical and psychological well-being, and it causes protracted suffering for the families.

THE DATA

Forced disappearances were among the most frequently reported incidents, after individual and collective murders; they accounted for one out of every five cases recorded. The testimonies compiled by the REMHI project confirm 3,893 victims of forced disappearance. In REMHI's testimonies, the army and

paramilitary forces were responsible for seven out of every ten forced disappearances (guerrillas or unknown perpetrators accounted for the rest). Besides the army, police units and military commissioners with ties to military intelligence played a significant role (forced disappearance accounts for one in four incidents attributed to the police and military commissioners respectively).

Despite unmistakable evidence of military and police involvement, and the total impunity with which they acted, the government and army have consistently denied having any control over, or responsibility for, forced disappearances. To date, the absence of official investigations has impeded attempts to search for the disappeared.

Covert actions and the initial uncertainty surrounding these incidents enabled intelligence agencies to delay public reaction and camouflage state responsibility. This also provided the captors with more opportunities to break down the detained-disappeared person's resistance. Disappearance had additional objectives, such as spreading terror and paralyzing the victim's social circle. In most of the cases involving intelligence corps, attempts were made to cover up any evidence to preclude investigations and ensure the perpetrators' ability to act with impunity, to escape punishment.

WIPING OUT LIFE: THE FORCED DISAPPEARANCE OF A FAMILY

Adriana Portillo lived with her family in Jutiapa. Her brother, Carlos Alfredo Portillo Hernandez, a member of the guerrilla army ORPA, perished in July 1981 when the army bombed a guerrilla safe house in Zone 14 in Guatemala City. Two months later, six members of her immediate family were abducted and disappeared: her two daughters, Rosaura, ten, and Glenda, nine; her seventy-year-old father, Adrián Portillo; her stepmother, Rosa de Portillo; her little sister, Alma Argentina Portillo, age eighteen months; and a sister-in-law, Edilisa Guadalupe Alvarez, eighteen. This took place in Zones 1 and 11 of the capital. According to the report, a police commando was responsible for these incidents.

On Friday, September 11, 1981, at about 9:00 A.M., a group of heavily armed men in civilian dress, riding in a white four-wheel-drive Cherokee Jeep with polarized windows and no license plates, arrived at the office where my father worked. After interrogating him, they took him away and we never found out anything more about him. My brother, Antonio, who witnessed my father's capture, went to warn my stepmother. But upon arriving at the house, he witnessed another military operation in progress.

including several vehicles without license plates, army jeeps, and police patrol cars.

My stepmother, my sister-in-law, my baby sister, and my two daughters were in the house, located at Second Avenue 1-57, in Zone 11 of the capital. Eyewitnesses saw the women and girls, crying and begging for help, pushed into one of the police cars.

We got to my father's house and we were immediately surrounded by members of the National Police, the Mobile Military Police, the army, and the Judicial Police. They were all heavily armed, and they pointed their weapons at us while they interrogated us. We didn't have any idea what was happening. They told us to go in if we wanted to see them. We refused to go in. When we realized what was happening, we started to hurry away from the house, and the men began to pursue us. But there was a taxi driver nearby who had probably seen everything. He started the car, opened the door for us to get in, and we left.

We never reported this for fear of reprisals. We were too afraid to talk about what had happened. In December 1981, we left Guatemala. Case 5021 and 5022, Guatemala City, September 11, 1981.

EXECUTIONS: "DOING SOMEONE IN"

Assassination was a criminal act that was frequently used, particularly by the intelligence services, to eliminate people previously selected because of their political activities. Since assassinations were carried out in covert operations, there were no written orders; members of the commando were referred to by pseudonyms, and the vehicles and weapons used were not registered to avoid being traced.

In general, the head of intelligence in a given zone ordered an extrajudicial execution, in certain cases after consulting with the highest echelons of military intelligence. If complications were anticipated, these actions were coordinated with other security forces, even to the extent of previously notifying the National Police that they should "clear out" an area and refrain from interfering with the commando's actions.

The methodology included surveillance of the individual for several days or weeks in order to become familiar with his or her movements. In general, the method of killing, the day, or escape alternatives were left up to the specialist responsible for the abduction or murder. The plans had to take into account the need to simulate a case of common crime or make identification difficult (for example, acting under cover of darkness); to choose an opportune moment (no witnesses); and to ensure that the person would not be merely wounded. Numerous assassinations of leaders and intellectuals, including anthropologist Myrna Mack, followed this pattern.