GUATEMALA: Political Violence

Guatemala is experiencing a new wave of political killings and abductions. In the first full month of Chief of State Mejía’s rule, the number of kidnapings jumped from 12 in August to 55 in September — the first full month of Mejía’s rule. In two cases this month Guatemalan employees of the US Agency for International Development have disappeared, and a prominent Christian Democrat publicly accused rightwing leaders — in concert with local authorities — of the murder last week of three party officials. Two leaders of a new leftist party also have been abducted.

Comment: Although leftist insurgent groups are responsible for some of the increased violence, the characteristics surrounding the incidents and the victims involved — as well as similarities to past patterns of violence in Guatemala — indicate that security forces and ultralightist civilian elements are almost certainly heavily involved. Unless Mejía takes forceful steps to reverse the trend and to account for the missing AID employees, his efforts to enhance Guatemala’s image abroad are likely to fail. Moreover, if violence against moderate and leftist political parties is left unchecked, some parties, particularly the new ones, are likely to be afraid to participate in the elections set for next year.