

Who Killed Guatemala's Leading Anthropologist?

*The Chief
Investigator Is
Dead, Key
Testimony Has
Been Recanted,
and the
Primary
Suspect Is
Missing, but
American and
Guatemalan
Officials
Promise Justice*

By Frank Smyth

GUATEMALA CITY—Myrna Elizabeth Mack Chang was Guatemala's most respected anthropologist. Her work with the country's indigenous refugees—displaced by the military's severe counterinsurgency practices—was internationally renowned. But on September 11, 1990, the petite, 40-year-old ethnic Chinese woman was attacked upon leaving her office here. Her assailants had been conspicuously watching her for at least a week. One of her attackers cleaned his weapon, described in one account as a "Rambo" knife, on her blouse, before leaving her with 27 deep puncture wounds.

The crime's investigation has become a test case to see whether the rule of law can be applied in Guatemala. Both American and Guatemalan officials recognize that its outcome is likely to determine future foreign aid relations. "When President [Jorge] Serrano came to office [in January] he did promise that he would do something, and I think he's beginning to deliver on the promise, and we are very, very pleased," U.S. ambassador Thomas Stroock said in a taped interview on July 4.

When she was killed, Mack had been collaborating with Georgetown University, the University of California at Berkeley, and the Ford Foundation. The grisly crime produced outrage worldwide. Guatemalan newspapers still regularly receive paid ads from social scientists and human rights organizations in Canada,

Europe, and the United States demanding a serious investigation. President Serrano, also on July 4, assured an American congressional delegation about the Mack case, "We are doing things, not just saying things."

But one month later, on August 5, the chief homicide investigator, José Miguel Merida Escobar, himself was gunned down. His own criminal report on the Mack case—obtained by the *Voice*—he inexplicably never ratified. Witnesses he interviewed have since recanted their testimony. A suspect that he first identified is believed to be dead or out of the country. And an alleged military intelligence file on the murdered anthropologist is being withheld from court authorities.

As a result, non-American Western diplomats and investigators from Guatemala's semiautonomous Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman say that many obstacles remain to solving the Mack murder. As in the November 1989 Jesuit murder case in neighboring El Salvador, military and other government officials are actively undermining the Mack investigation, they say.

Mack's colleagues in Guatemala believe she was murdered on the orders of Guatemala's notorious military intelligence apparatus. "We have no doubt that this was the work of the G-2, the counterintelligence body of the army," attorney Ronalth Ochaeta, from the Catholic archdiocese's human rights office, told a visiting congressional delegation shortly after

the murder.

Mack's work was highly controversial in Guatemala. The country's displaced population was created by the army's "scorched earth" counterinsurgency campaign, which began in the early 1980s. Tens of thousands of people—mostly Indians of Mayan de-



scend—were killed. Up to 1 million more, in a country of fewer than 9 million, were uprooted. The government has been reluctant even to recognize the existence of the country's own displaced population; Mack's research began to document their numbers and conditions.

Independent investigators recognize that they face an uphill battle: Guatemala holds one of Latin America's worst records for human rights-related murders. No military officer and only a handful of soldiers have been convicted of human rights violations. Government officials admit that the military enjoys impunity even

when compared to El Salvador and other Central American nations. Even cases involving American citizens—the November 1989 abduction of Ursuline sister Diana Ortiz and the June 1990 kidnapping/murder of rancher Michael Devine, for example—remain unsolved.

On August 5, chief investigator Merida was shot to death only 150 yards from his own Police Headquarters in Guatemala City.

Merida had already assumed a controversial role in the investigation. In the original criminal report compiled last September, Merida, along with another police detective, implicated undercover

military units in the Mack murder. One witness quoted in their original report testified that he recognized one of the assailants as being from an intelligence office attached to the military high command. The witness had worked for 23 years in the state security forces, independent investigators say. But this testimony was omitted from the police report before being sent to the court. The witness has since recanted his own statement—and, before he died, Merida refused to ratify his own report.

At the time, American and Guatemalan officials dismissed these irregularities, arguing that

the anthropologist's murder was most likely a "common crime." Ambassador Stroock—a political appointee of the Bush administration who was a school chum of the president's at Yale—wrote personal letters to American academics who had denounced the Mack murder in the Guatemalan press, asserting that the crime was not politically motivated. President Serrano, on March 1, 1991, circulated an official report to members of the European diplomatic corps that suggested that Mack "had done some hard-currency business on the black market and had been the target of persecution by delinquents."

But few if any diplomats were persuaded. Said one, "The [government's] whole description of that case was scandalous."

Three months later, under intense international pressure, the government officially reversed its position, and American officials have since followed suit. On June 17, 1991, Guatemalan attorney general Acisclo Valladares officially acknowledged that the crime had a "political" motive and that it had been "programmed," or premeditated. The attorney general added, "Within the next few days, the results of the developments in this process will be made public, which will clarify the crime."

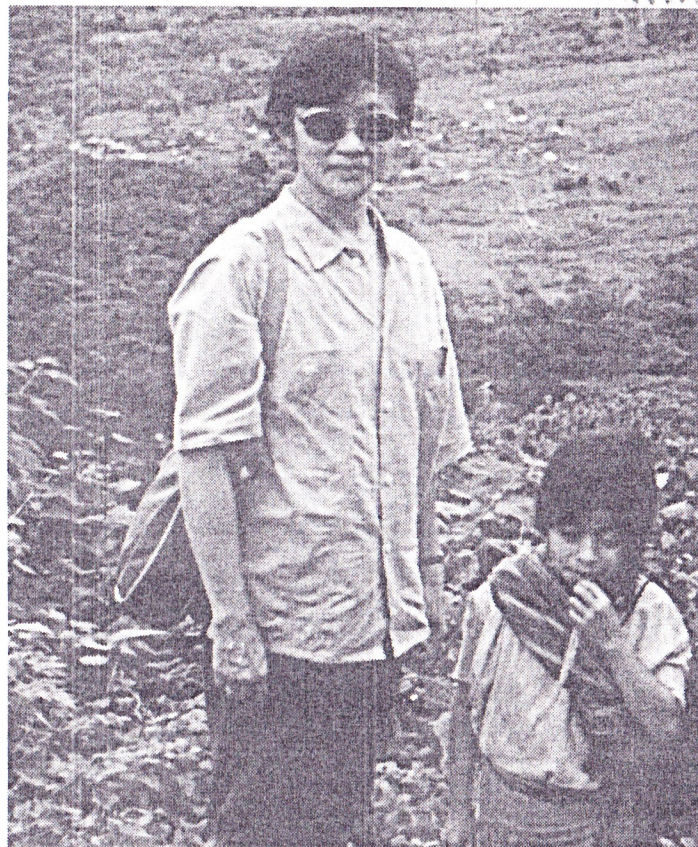
On July 4, the government announced—via a newspaper report—that it was issuing an arrest warrant for a suspect in the case, **Noel de Jesús Beteta Alvarez**, a special sergeant major with the Security Section of the Presidential High Command. Strangely, the basis for the charge was the

same police report rejected by its own authors. Although Beteta is not mentioned by name in the original report, the testimony that implicated him was recorded September 17, 1991, just six days after the Mack murder.

So far, the government has not explained why it waited up to nine months before trying to arrest Beteta. In interviews the week before Beteta was publicly named, independent investigators and other sources said his identity was already well known. They believe the government intentionally orchestrated the delay. "The fact of too much publicity has made a witness willingly disappear," noted an investigator from the ombudsman's office.

Beteta was relieved of his post with the Presidential High Command less than 12 weeks after the Mack murder, according to military documents filed with the court. The documents state that as of November 30, 1990, Beteta "does not enjoy military privilege." Within a month after being relieved, Beteta mysteriously disappeared. Family members have said they believe he is dead. Others suspect he has fled. Regardless, it seems unlikely he will be prosecuted.

Rather than lead to Beteta's apprehension, the issuing of a warrant for his arrest seemed more intended to affect international opinion. The day before the arrest order was announced, 16 U.S. congresswomen called for a full investigation in a paid ad in the Guatemalan press. On the morning the arrest order was issued, a prearranged meeting between President Serrano and U.S. sena-



Myrna Elizabeth Mack Chang: the army and government did not appreciate the implications of her research.

tor James Jeffords (Republican, Vermont) and Representative Jim McDermott (Democrat, Washington), who had traveled to Guatemala specifically to monitor progress on the Mack and other human rights cases, was scheduled.

"To find that the name [of the person] had been announced at least at the execution level was very interesting," Jeffords said in an interview. "[It] indicated that

whoever was putting things together did an excellent job to reach what we thought was a significant break in the Myrna Mack case."

Witnesses quoted in the murdered investigator's original report indicate that Beteta may very well have been one of Mack's assassins. However, it is unlikely that Beteta—even if he could be located and tried—acted alone.

The presence of a personal file

on Mack compiled by Guatemalan military intelligence suggests that higher authorities may be involved, according to human rights ombudsman Ramiro de Leon Carpio. Carpio has publicly complained that the government is not committed to defending human rights. In July, his investigators made the existence of the Mack file known to a visiting U.S. congressional delegation.

Court officials have formally requested all information on Mack from the Guatemalan ministry of defense. But no military intelligence file on Mack has been turned over, according to court sources.

Senator Jeffords said he raised the file in the July 4 meeting with President Serrano. "We pointed out to the president that the investigator from [the ombudsman's office] announced that they had found a detailed file on Myrna Mack in the army. It indicated that obviously [the investigation] should go higher."

In his official response, Serrano told Jeffords, "If there is anyone involved in the higher-ups, we are going to know it through the process. And if there is one, he is going to be punished." Serrano, as well as senior presidential aides, made it clear that authorities do not now plan to press the investigation any higher. They also failed to explain how they intend to apprehend Beteta—the only suspect currently charged in the crime.

The failure to achieve justice in such cases "demonstrates a lack of political will or sympathy," said Ombudsman Carpio. "The reign of impunity goes on." ■