

Guatemala

Response to Information Request Number:	GTM00003.ZNK
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Subject:	Guatemala: Kaibiles and the Massacre at Las Dos Erres
From:	INS Resource Information Center, Washington, D.C.
Keywords:	Guatemala / Military / Massacres / Guerrillas / Extrajudicial executions

Query:

What is the Kaibiles unit in the Guatemalan military, where does it operate and what are some of its distinguishing characteristics? How were the Kaibiles involved in the massacre at Las Dos Erres?

Response:

On December 5, 1974, Guatemala's military government created the Commando School (*Escuela de Comandos*). Three months later, on March 5, 1975, it renamed it Kaibil Center for Training and Special Operations (*Centro de Adiestramiento y Operaciones Especiales Kaibil*). The name Kaibil is derived from Kaibil Balam, a Mam indigenous leader who evaded capture by the Spanish conquistadores under Pedro de Alvarado.

Initially, the Kaibil Center was located on two estates, *El Infierno* ("Hell") and *La Pólvara* ("Gunpowder") in the municipality of Melchor de Mencos, Petén. On January 12, 1989, it was moved to the former headquarters of Military Zone 23, in Poptún, Petén.

According to the Guatemalan Ministry of Defense, the Kaibil Center's mission is to train an elite corps of commandos: "To select, by means of arduous, difficult training under and mental pressure, members of the army capable of engaging in commando operations." This corps, commonly known as the Kaibiles, is distinguished from regular troops by their maroon berets with patches bearing a blazing sword. The Kaibil creed, displayed in bold red lettering atop the Kaibil Center's web page, is "If I go forward, follow me. If I stop, urge me on. If I turn back, kill me" (Guatemalan Military, Jan. 2000).

In February 1999, the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), established under United Nations auspices by the 1996 Peace Accords, called attention to the brutalizing nature of the training conducted by the Kaibil Center:

The Commission's report documented examples of massacres of civilians by the Kaibiles, such as the one in December 1982 at Las Dos Erres. In October 1982, guerrillas ambushed an army convoy near Palestina, in the vicinity of Las Dos Erres. They killed 21 soldiers and took 19 rifles. On December 4, a contingent of 58 Kaibiles, 18 of them instructors, were flown into the area. The following day, they received orders to disguise themselves as guerrillas, deploy to Las Dos Erres and kill the inhabitants, who were considered guerrilla sympathizers. Dressed as guerrillas, the Kaibiles arrived in the hamlet at 2:30 a.m., December 6. They forced the inhabitants out of their homes, corralling the men in the schoolhouse and the women and children in the hamlet's two churches. A subsequent search uncovered no sign of weapons or guerrilla propaganda. At 6 a.m., officers consulted superiors by radio, then informed the commandos they would be "vaccinating" the inhabitants after breakfast. In the early afternoon, the Kaibiles separated

out the children, and began killing them. They bashed the smallest children's heads against walls and trees, and killed the older ones with hammer blows to the head. Their bodies were dumped in a well. Next, the commandos interrogated the men and women one by one, then shot or bashed them with the hammer, and dumped them in the well. They raped women and girls, and ripped the fetuses out of pregnant women. The massacre continued throughout December 7. On the morning of December 8, as the Kaibiles were preparing to leave, another 15 persons, among them children, arrived in the hamlet. With the well already full, they took the newcomers to a location half an hour away, then shot all but two of them. To maintain the appearance of being a guerrilla column, they kept two teenage girls for the next few days, raping them repeatedly and finally strangling them once they were no longer useful (CEH, Feb. 1999).

The Kaibiles' bloody record led the Catholic Church's Interdiocesan Project for the Recovery of Historical Memory (*Proyecto Interdiocesano de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica*, REMHI) to recommend disbandment in its April 1998 report, *Guatemala: Never Again* (*Guatemala: Nunca Más*):

In December 1996, shortly before the signing of the Peace Accords, President Alvaro Arzú Irigoyen spoke of his intention to preserve the Kaibiles in peacetime, but rededicate them to another war: the war on narcotics and crime. Addressing a Kaibil graduation ceremony in Poptún, he said "Now this new army of peace will face an enemy that perhaps is much more powerful than the one we faced for many years. We are talking of drug traffickers and criminals who want to corrode the country; they are better armed, equipped, and trained than the enemies we had to face in the past" (Montenegro, 1996).

Under the terms of the Peace Accords, the army was to be restricted to defense from external attack, which would preclude involvement in the sort of domestic police actions proposed by President Arzú. Yet according to *Jane's Intelligence Review*, "the army has refused to disband the Special Forces Training and Operations Centre, housed at El Inferno (sic), in the vicinity of Poptun, Peten." As of December 1998, *Janes's* reported that there were three groups of Kaibiles, one consisting of instructors, and two consisting of 162 commandos apiece. Each group is divided into four platoons of 38 men, which are subdivided into squads of nine men (Montes, Dec. 1998).

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

References:

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"Los sistemas de instrucción militar de oficiales y personal de tropa y especialistas deben ser reformados profundamente, pues continúan siendo una amenaza para la convivencia social. En tal sentido debe ser reformulado el p nsu m de estudios militares, reorientadas las funciones, organizaci n y armamento de las bases y cuerpos especiales del Ej rcito, a la vez que deben cancelarse aquellos centros que simbolizan la agresi n contra la poblaci n, como la Escuela de Kaibiles."

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