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**New Hope for Missing Kids:
Victims of Guatemala's civil war are
likely to be alive, report says**

By Mary Jo McConahay, Chronicle Foreign Service

...A report released last month by a leading human rights organization is giving new hope to relatives of hundreds -- perhaps thousands -- of children who disappeared during the 36-year civil war that ended in 1996.

As in Argentina and El Salvador, Guatemalan children vanished during years of fierce conflict between army troops and a leftist opposition.

The Roman Catholic Archdiocese Human Rights Office now says that the missing are likely to be alive, in Guatemala or adopted by families abroad, including in the United States, and that reunions are possible. They have details of 86 cases and say there are accounts of 358 other cases that could not be fully documented.

In the vast majority of disappearances, the children were abducted after the army attacked a Maya Indian village and killed many of its residents.

“Whenever the army entered like that, we knew they just killed, so we ran -- children and old people, too,” said Luis Curruchich, 48, who recalled the last day he saw his daughter Aura Marina, then 3 years old.

Twenty years ago, this highland village, along with hundreds of other Maya settlements, was considered “subversive.” Soldiers fired machine guns and lobbed grenades, Curruchich said as he sat on a cot in a two-room house with mud brick walls and a floor of packed dirt. Outside, an improvised garden of begonias and geraniums bloomed in milk cans.

Curruchich remembered diving into a ditch, neighbors falling around him. When soldiers left, he said, they took Aura Marina and another daughter, Amalia, 5. An infant girl, who had not been named, disappeared, too. His wife, Maria Transito, 25, is buried with 13 others who died that day in a mass grave still visible on the edge of the village.

For the next two years, Curruchich's mother doggedly combed orphanages until she recovered the older girl and two other grandchildren.

Acquaintances discreetly reported that they had recognized the toddler Aura Marina at the municipal building in the county seat, San Martin Jilotepeque, where a local woman appeared to have taken her away "in adoption." He said the new report has given him hope that he might see his youngest daughter -- who would be 23 years old -- once more.

The church report said many children were first taken to army bases before being given to soldiers and officers whose wives could not have children or to increase the size of their families. They also placed them in orphanages or trafficked in international adoptions. In just two known cases, guerrillas took adolescent boys to join their ranks.

Moreover, captured children were often used as bait, their photos distributed on flyers to entice families suspected of supporting guerrillas to surrender themselves to army garrisons.

In the case of Baudilio Monzon, a 9-year-old Maya boy who vanished in 1984, a military helicopter dropped flyers with a picture of the boy in a hospital bed and a message promising his safety if villagers came out of the jungle where they had fled. His parents have not seen him since.

The study includes seven cases in which children were reunited with relatives, and it calls on the government of President Alfonso Portillo to establish a high-level commission with access to state archives, including records of the army, which remains a powerful institution.

Portillo, who attended the presentation of the report in the national cathedral, has not responded to its contents. In fact, his government includes several people who served as ranking officials during the conflict, including former military dictator Efraim Rios Montt, now president of the Congress.

“It's risky,” admitted Roberto Cabrera, administrative director of the archdiocese rights office.

Two years ago, the office produced a monumental study that cataloged hundreds of massacres and other violence in which about 200,000 people died, mostly unarmed Maya Indians in an army scorched-earth campaign.

Within 48 hours of its ceremonial presentation, human rights office director Bishop Juan Gerardi was discovered bludgeoned to death in a crime that remains unsolved but is widely believed to have been politically motivated.

An atmosphere of distrust persists, making searches difficult.

In the rural Caqchiquel Maya settlement where Luis Curruchich lives, about 60 miles east of the capital of Guatemala City, families may know each other's histories intimately and even support a desire to hunt for lost village children.

But secrets are more guarded among the urban tin-roofed squatters' homes that cling to the sides of the deep canyons that edge Guatemala City, where thousands fled from the violence.

In one concrete-block cubicle in a crowded colony called Santiago lives a couple whose 9-month-old son was left behind when the army attacked and adults scattered.

“They won't talk to outsiders because they are still afraid,” said 48-year-old Diosio Martinez, who was also a neighbor in the couple's home village. “The boy would be 19 now, and sometimes at night you can hear the mother cry out for him.”

Some of the separated children may not be in Guatemala but in France or the United States. During the years when most disappeared, from 1979 to 1983, about 438 Guatemalan “orphans” were adopted by U.S. citizens, according to the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs.

Nevertheless, the search should be a government priority, Cabrera suggested, to help bring reconciliation to the country of 11.5 million. Cabrera, who is also a medical doctor, said extreme feelings of guilt affect surviving relatives for “losing” children; in cases where they have been found, youth often cannot overcome a deep sense of having been “abandoned” by parents.

In 1998, a U.N.-sponsored Truth Commission called for a government-backed search for vanished children in its report, "Memory of Silence," which described the government campaign against Maya civilians as "genocide."

Beyond a healing sense of closure and reconciliation, the legal repercussions of the search for children are potentially enormous. The report's authors argue that a majority of incidents constitute "forced disappearances," a serious crime under Guatemalan and international human rights law.

In a recent case, nine high-ranking Argentine officers, including Gen. Leopoldo Galtieri, who led a military junta during that country's "dirty war," have been jailed for trafficking children of parents who were assassinated or disappeared.

Tracking vanished children appears to be spreading as a strategy for other activists. The Families of the Disappeared of Guatemala (FAMDEGUA), which undertook exhumations at massacre sites in the 1990s, announced that it will publish a book detailing the cases of 12 children who survived massacres but disappeared.

A new group called Watch is being set up in Guatemala and Chicago to investigate the children's whereabouts. And a group of returnees from refugee camps in Mexico is investigating cases of five children, ages 8 to 13.

Often such activists say they identify for personal reasons with those who lost small children. Urban community organizer Francisca Osorio's adult brother disappeared on the way to visit family in 1984 after being stopped at a rural military roadblock.

“They feel about their children the way I feel about my brother, that you see them through smoke, not knowing if they are dead or alive,” said Osorio. “To this day I sleep with the door open, in case he appeared and someone was chasing him, so he could enter quickly. You never forget.”