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In strife-racked Guatemala, hope is a UFO

By VICKI BARKER
FOR THE BALTIMORE SUN

EL PROGRESO, Guatemala — The mysterious lights have appeared in the sky over eastern Guatemala nearly every night since mid-February.

They have become the national preoccupation in a land whose mysteries are usually more heartbreakingly earth-bound, bringing thousands of sightseers to this mountainous region and dominating the headlines of the country's newspapers.

Beside photographs of "disappeared" people, above articles about battered corpses dumped on rural roadsides, newspaper headlines ask, "What are the true facts about UFOs?" Grainy pictures are displayed with captions such as, "UFO seen in the area of El Progreso last night." Day after day, Guatemalan newspaper readers used to more

somber fare reveled in eyewitness accounts of doctors, lawyers, pilots, police officers, engineers and private citizens.

"We were able to observe the UFO (unidentified flying object) with absolute clarity," reads a typical account. "It suddenly emitted a powerful light and passed about two kilometers away from us. It had a number of lights below, in the rear and above, and it made no sound."

The lights, when they appear, invariably show up between 7:50 p.m. and 8:20 p.m. Every evening about that time, hundreds of people stream into this area, about an hour's drive from Guatemala City, to see the UFOs for themselves.

As darkness fell over the jagged terrain one night in March, the road that links Guatemala City with the Caribbean coast was lined with parked cars and vans. Salsa music and American rock

songs blared from car radios. Teenagers laughed and flirted; adults chatted amiably and stamped their feet in the unseasonable cold. A beer salesman in a loudspeaker truck broadcast a running commentary on UFOs, laced with plugs for Gallo, the national beer, while his assistants sold bottles to the crowd.

"We came from the capital because we wanted to see for ourselves what these things might be," said Roderico Fretana, an unemployed father of three. "Do I believe in visitors from other worlds? Yes, I believe the possibility exists."

"We've had other phenomena like this before here," said the Rev. Antonio Quinones, a Roman Catholic priest. He was sitting in the back of a pickup truck with some men from his village.

"Before the 1976 earthquake, the wa-

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ter level rose in this area, and lights appeared then, too."

Father Quinones was agnostic on the subject of extraterrestrial tourists.

"It doesn't matter whether you believe or disbelieve," he shrugged. "The word says it all: They're unidentified flying objects."

As 7:50 approached, people began scanning the eastern skies.

Suddenly, someone shouted: "There it is!"

A pulsing white light appeared over the mountains. As it approached, a group of women cried, "It's a UFO!"

"It's an airplane," said a small boy standing with them.

"No, it's a UFO," one of the women said.

"It's a helicopter," the child insisted.

"But listen, it's not making any noise. It's a UFO," the woman said.

"A UFO! A UFO!" the child cried.

The light passed across a broad valley several miles from the onlookers and disappeared behind a mountain range. About 20 minutes later, another light winked. Then the skies were empty of everything but the stars.

At 8:20 p.m., the crowd began to disperse. Some people wondered

whether they had simply seen a commercial airliner making the Panama-Mexico City run. Most seemed convinced that they had had an encounter with the unexplained.

James Baillieu, a law student from Melbourne, Australia, had paid a Guatemala City cabdriver \$50 to take him to a spot about five miles farther down the road. From that vantage point, he said, he was able to get a closer look at the UFO.

"I was looking at it through binoculars," he said. "It had two bright lights, one red, and a wedge-shaped tail.

"It looked like an airplane, but it was much bigger than an airplane," Baillieu said.

Guatemala is a nation with a largely illiterate population. It has three active volcanoes, frequent earthquakes, an active guerrilla insurgency and a military with a well-earned reputation for random violence. This potent brew of man-made and natural calamities keeps about a lively canon of modern folklore. The UFOs are being seen through the prism of that folklore.

Thus, the lights are heralding another earthquake; they are responsible for the winter's record cold temperatures; they are drawn to Mayan ruins in the area; they are

drawn to a modern cement factory in the area.

More educated guesses suggest that the aircraft are international gun-runners, drug traffickers or military aircraft of some non-Central American nation.

"Guatemalan officials neither believe nor disbelieve," as one of them put it. The head of the national police has appealed, somewhat unnecessarily, for calm. He points out, truthfully, that "up to now, the UFOs haven't caused anyone any problems."

Three observation posts have been set up around El Progreso, and the police and air force are investigating. A government that denies that death squads exist here cannot quite bring itself to deny the existence of flying saucers.

Officially, the United States has no position on the UFOs, although one embassy spokesman said that the reports are not being taken very seriously.

"Every time it's come up around here, it's kind of 'ha, ha,'" he said. "I suppose if we get a request, we'll cable NASA (the National Aeronautics and Space Administration) or something."

Guatemala's American community, too, seems diverted but unconvinced.

"Sure, I saw one of those UFOs

just last night," said the bartender at an American expatriate bar. "Elvis was driving that sucker."

Estuardo Velasquez, the director of the government's Institute of Seismology, Vulcanology, Meteorology and Hydrology, conceded that institute observers had detected the presence of some kind of aircraft in the region.

"All we can say about these machines is that they've been observed flying parallel to the Sierra de las Minas mountain range on a northeast to southwesterly course, at an altitude of about 1,000 meters," he said patiently.

"The truth is that here at the institute we only believe what we can see. People are saying all kinds of different things about these machines, but that doesn't mean they're true."

However, an institute technician who had been working quietly during the interview took a reporter aside after Velasquez left the room.

"I saw the UFOs myself," he said. "The one I saw had a bright white light in front, and three or four little windows with a reddish glow inside.

"You should go out and see for yourself," he said. "They won't hurt you. I think they're here to help us."