

Mormons face Latin attacks

Some say missionaries are victims of anti-American sentiment

By Jim Robbins
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

SALT LAKE CITY - Officials at the world headquarters of the Mormon Church here are increasingly concerned over a spate of violent attacks aimed at their missionaries and church buildings throughout Latin America.

Since the United States invaded Panama on Dec. 20, at least 14 Mormon churches have been bombed in South America, and a church missionary in the Dominican Republic has been shot in the leg. The most recent attack on a Mormon church occurred Tuesday in Caracas.

Church leaders say the attacks are not related to Mormon beliefs but are a reflection of anti-American sentiment. With dark suits and ties, white shirts, short hair and Jewish churches, church officials say, Mormon missionaries are high-profile Americans.

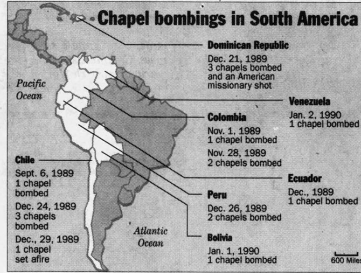
Last May 24, two Mormon missionaries in La Paz, Bolivia - Todd Wilson, 20, and Jeffrey Ball, 20, both from Utah - were gunned down in front of their La Paz home by three persons in a yellow Volkswagen. A leftist guerrilla group, the Zarate Willka Armed Liberation Front, claimed responsibility. In July, a Mormon church in La Paz was bombed, and three Mormon churches in Santiago, Chile, were attacked. In one of the assaults in Santiago, gunmen held about 30 Mormons at gunpoint and forced a church leader from the United States to disrobe. Other churches were damaged in Peru and elsewhere.

"There is very little, if any, anti-Mormonism involved," said Richard Bretzing, managing director of security for the Mormon Church. "They are drawing the correlation that the church is North American and because of that directing actions against a very visible presence."

Church officials said there are also widespread rumors in Latin America that the church is allied with the Central Intelligence Agency, a charge church officials vehemently deny.

There are people who have studied the situation, however, who say the guerrillas have specifically targeted the Mormons.

Lamont Tullis, a professor of political science at Brigham Young University, which is operated by the Mormons, said the church has never worked with the CIA. "But it is true," he said, "that a num-



ber had a presence in Latin America have also been, at one point in their lives, functionaries of the CIA." Tullis, himself a Mormon, has studied the church in Latin America.

David Knowlton, an assistant professor of anthropology at Washington University in St. Louis who wrote a paper on attacks against the church in Latin America, believes that left-wing terrorists are waging a campaign of violence against the church.

From 1984 until July of last year, he said, there were 62 attacks on Mormon churches. He said religion in South America is highly politicized, and the Mormons have made US values a part of their religion, claiming that the US Constitution was divinely inspired and that the United States is the biblical promised land. The church also preaches strict patriarchy and has a rigid hierarchy and extensive corporate holdings.

"It's a conservative organization," said a State Department official who has studied the situation but asked not to be identified. "And it teaches conservative values."

Knowlton, a practicing Mormon and former missionary in Bolivia, said the missionaries pose other threats. "The Mormons are proselytizing in the same neighborhoods as the guerrillas," Knowlton said. "As a result, they are seen as competition."

Bretzing, the former head of the Los Angeles office of the FBI, has been investigating the attacks in South America and has met with State Department officials. Suspects in the killing of the two missionaries have been arrested and are being

convert to the Mormon Church.

Extra security precautions taken by Mormon missionaries include traveling in groups, changing routines and in some cases not wearing the traditional dark suit. The church is also relying more on native missionaries.

"In spite of these oppositions, we're going to prevail," said Bretzing. Knowlton, however, does not believe the changes are enough. "The church needs to open a dialogue with the left," he said. "The dialogue now is with people of right-wing persuasion. It needs social balance."

The Mormon Church, thanks largely to its 40,000 missionaries, is one of the fastest-growing in the world. There are about 7 million Mormons worldwide. The church estimates it has 1.4 million members in South America, second only to the Catholic Church.

Many members of the Mormon Church - officially known as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints - embark on an 18-month mission at age 19 or in their early 20s to spread the word of the Book of Mormon. Missions are considered to be among the highest of spiritual callings, and are paid for by the missionaries or their families.

Some families have expressed reservations about the safety of their children, but church leaders deny that the attacks have chilled their missionary efforts.

"The brother of Elder Wilson said I'll go where you want me to go, even if it's Bolivia," said Jerry Cahill, a church spokesman, speaking of the brother of one of the slain missionaries. "I think that's

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