

# Teetering on the Brink of Civil War

The following few pages are especially designed for those of you who have not been keeping in touch with the outside world (yes, it still exists).

The article on this page is reprinted from the Nov. 7, 1980, issue of the University of Calgary's student newspaper, *The Gauntlet*. American aid to El Salvador was cut off in December, 1980, after four missionaries were murdered in El Salvador, but the shipment of jeeps, trucks, and helicopters has most recently been resumed.

by Jim Stanford

The tiny Central American nation of El Salvador is teetering on the brink of full-scale civil war. Political killings are occurring at a rate of a dozen or so daily, and this in a country with a population of only 3½ million to start with. Peasants and industrial workers strike and demonstrate regularly; there is an exodus of upper-class residents, investors and capital. There are ominous warnings of military intervention from neighboring Honduras or Guatemala, or even directly from the United States. The Legal Aid Society of the San Salvador diocese of the Catholic Church has estimated that there have been 6,000 political assassinations so far in 1980, with an additional 1,000 unaccounted-for disappearances.

Much like the rest of Central America, El Salvador has a poor and underdeveloped economy, dominated by American investment. Coffee, the primary agricultural product of the nation, is produced on large, privately-owned plantations, using the labor of the landless peasants who make up the bulk of the population. A tiny group of 14 rich families own most of the land, some say as much as 80% of producing agricultural land; as a result, much of the opposition to the current military junta comes from the countryside.

In the cities, however, the small industrial working class is also highly politicized, as evidenced by a recent wave of paralyzing general strikes. Not surprisingly, this sector of the population is the target for much of the political repression that is taking place. For example, in late August, when the union of electrical workers occupied power stations across El Salvador and cut off electricity for 23 hours as a protest against the government, over 100 of its leaders and rank-and-file members were arrested by the National Guard, and detained without charge or trial. Similarly, over 600 workers were rounded up during the general strike of August 13-15 of this year, and many of them have yet to be released.

This unrest has been fermenting in El Salvador for years. Since 1931, when the last free elections were held, the country has been ruled by a succession of military governments, more re-

cently by Carlos Romero, a heavy-handed, conservative dictator with close ties to the ex-President of Nicaragua, Anastasio Somoza. As political opposition increased, and the popular opposition forces became more unified, Romero was toppled, on Oct. 15, 1979, in an American-backed, bloodless coup, and replaced with a five-man junta, comprised of two top military commanders and three Christian Democratic politicians. In an effort to ward off a left-oriented

popular uprising, the junta launched a few moderate reforms. The military command structure remained largely unchanged, however, and pressure from other military leaders forced the transfer of most of the junta's power to Col. Jaime Gutierrez, the more conservative of the junta's two military members. Even the Christian Democrat members of the ruling body enjoy the support of only a minority of their party's organization.

Political opposition and violence continued unabated, and as a result the junta moved further and further to the right, abandoning many of its reforms. The situation reached a climax this past summer, with the murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero, the outspoken head of El Salvador's relatively progressive Catholic Church, who had been highly critical of the junta's political repression. Workers began a series of general strikes, and the countryside became the site of major battles between government and opposition armed forces (where previously violence was limited to isolated skirmishes). Things have cooled down somewhat since then, but the situation remains essentially unchanged.

There is much confusion

outside of El Salvador as to exactly what the political situation is within that country. Calgaryans received a first-hand perspective of the turmoil when Merardo Gomez, a former professor at the National University of San Salvador, recently spoke to an audience of about 150 at the U of C.

Gomez is a representative of the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR), a coalition, twenty years in the making, that was formed early this year and consists of the four largest opposition groups within El Salvador. The FDR has its headquarters in exile in Mexico.

Speaking through a translator, Gomez pointed out that the most common conception in Canada of the situation within El Salvador is that of left-wing and right-wing extremists battling it out, with a moderate junta in the middle trying to preserve order.



This image is fostered, he said, by the foreign policy statements of both the Salvadoran junta and the American and Canadian governments, and by the reports carried in the privately-owned Western media.

But Gomez alleged that most of the casualties are being incurred by the so-called 'leftist extremists', and that government and so-called 'rightist extremists' are escaping largely unscathed. For instance, a United Press International story, carried in the Aug. 27, 1980 Calgary Herald, reported that, the previous day, 13 Salvadorans had been killed in political violence, including "the first two right-wing extremists ever reported killed in a clash with government troops"; at that point, nearly 5,000 people had been killed in political violence in El Salvador in 1980.

Gomez claimed that the broad coalition of opposition groups that he represents legitimately represents the sentiment of the majority of the Salvadoran people, and said that the FDR is considering the possibility of establishing a provisional government-in-exile.

And he also asserted that it is not right-wing death squads, but in fact actual government troops and their associates that are doing all of this killing. Quoting statistics compiled by the San

Salvador diocese of the Catholic Church, Gomez pointed out that 85% of all Salvadorans killed so far in 1980 were murdered by military forces in uniform, and that most of the killings were carried out by paramilitary forces, described by the Church as "military in plainclothes."

As an aside, Gomez said that the Church has an interest in collecting such statistics, for since Archbishop Romero's assassination, a number of other priests and church administrators in El Salvador have been killed or kidnapped.

On the basis of these facts, Gomez asserted that by no means is the present junta 'moderate'; the 6,000 killed so far this year is a figure three times as large as the total number killed altogether under the previous two military administrations, including President Romero's reign of terror.

Gomez said the situation with its violence has been building up for three decades, as the people of El Salvador revolted against the political repression and violence of a succession of American-backed military regimes. He claimed that the past history of El Salvador, indeed of all of Central America, including most recently Nicaragua, backs him up.

Gomez went on to say that the greatest threat facing the Salvadoran people is not the destruction resulting from the inevitable revolution, as other nations have gone through similar upheavals and then managed to rebuild, but the possibility of overt American military intervention.

The United States is already involved in El Salvador with extensive military and political support for the junta, such as the recently approved \$5 million donation of military supplies, and the loan to the junta's military command of 200 American military advisors and experts in counter-insurgency (see last Friday's Calgary Herald). These Americans are accompanying the Salvadoran National Guard on their operations, both in the countryside and in the cities.

But Gomez fears that this intervention might soon increase. The junta has lost so much of its

base of support, that he feels that both the junta and its American backers know it must soon fall. The FDR has isolated a number of different scenarios if this proves to be the case.

Gomez believes that the first tact will be another coup, backed by the U.S. and the military. This would declare present Christian Democrat junta member Napoleón Duarte as President, make a few other minor shuffles, and then try to pin the blame for the current repression on present Defense Minister Jose Garcia. The FDR thinks this will have little effect, as the Salvadoran people would realize that it wasn't a change at all.

After this, there could be more direct military intervention, according to Gomez. Currently stationed off the Pacific coast of El Salvador are two American aircraft carriers, with 60 planes and a total of 3,000 Marines. Along with this is the U.S. Rapid Deployment Force, stationed in Miami and the Panama Canal Zone, ready to defend American 'strategic interests' in the region; the FDR has vocally denounced this force as a preparation for intervention.

Less directly, there are 37 U.S. advisors working in neighboring Honduras and more in Guatemala, purportedly training ex-Nicaraguan National Guardsmen and anti-Castro Cuban exiles for mercenary action in El Salvador. Interestingly, the removal of the advisors in Honduras was one of the demands of the Honduran high-school students who recently occupied the Venezuelan embassy in that country, the claim also being that the Americans were stationed there in preparation for intervention in El Salvador.

So Gomez stressed the necessity of international political pressure to discourage any potential American intervention, or intervention by proxy, and pointed out the important role of that solidarity in the recent victory of the Nicaraguan people. Even if the U.S. does intervene, he said, the Salvadoran people know their strength, and will seize power sooner or later anyway.

Gomez was pleased with the success of the FDR coalition in building unity among the popular opposition forces, and felt that this unity was the major reason behind this year's upsurge in the opposition political activity.

He made a special appeal for support from the university community on the U of C campus, pointing out that his own university, the only major post-secondary institution in El Salvador, had been completely shut down and occupied by the military, as a result of opposition to the government from students and faculty.