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EL SALVADOR

Massive Peace March Against Violence Held

Tens of thousands of marchers, representing a variety of social, religious and political organizations, participated in a large demonstration on Saturday, 22 July, at the Monument to the Savior of the World on San Salvador's west side, under the banner of "Yes to Peace, No to Violence." Most participants wore white shirts or blouses and came together to pray for peace and an end to civil violence in El Salvador.

One of the speakers, José Domingo Méndez, former president of the Supreme Court of Justice, stated: "We lift a prayer to God so that, without losing hope, we will always struggle to maintain peace in our country."

The peace demonstration was held in response to escalating social tensions in San Salvador since 5 July, when anti-riot units of the National Civilian Police (PNC) tried to disband a large student demonstration near the National University of El Salvador. The incident left two policemen dead, one university employee was shot in the chest and 10 other people were wounded, according to press reports.

National University of El Salvador Occupied by Police

The violence, which erupted during a student protest against bus fare hikes on 5 July, also led to the police occupation of El Salvador's National University (UNES) for days, the emergency evacuation of more than 700 people, the capture of between 20 to 30 students, and a university administrator being gravely injured—allegedly shot by a sniper aboard a police helicopter. During the weekend of 8-9 July, the detained students were released from jail due to lack of evidence, the police finally left the university, and on 11 July a captured union leader also was released.

However, the ramifications of the violent confrontation were alarming. The Human Right's Office called the violence instigated by the PNC the "worst violation of human rights since the Peace Accords." And, although there was indeed a renegade within the protestors that fired at police, social movement organizations, human rights groups and student groups have all called the government's response "an unjustified use of force" that represents a serious setback to the '92 Peace Accords.

Alleged Killer of Two Police Officers Identified

Government officials have identified José Mario Belloso Castillo as the man responsible for killing the two police officers during the protest march in San Salvador on 5 July. Belloso, an alleged member of an armed wing of the leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) political party who received training in guerrilla tactics in Cuba, is believed to have fled the country. However, the police have arrested Luis Antonio Herrador Funes, who was captured on video assisting Belloso as he allegedly fired his M-16 at riot police.

Belloso is known to police, having been arrested in Oct '05 during a violent protest against an increase in bus fares. He is also believed to be involved with logistics for the *Bloque Popular Juvenil* (BPJ)—a subsidiary of the left-wing *Bloque Popular Social*, which comprises *campesino* organizations, teachers, religious leaders, students, community groups, youth, labor unions and war veterans.

The 5 July demonstration by high school and university students was staged to protest a rise in bus fares and electricity rates. Violence broke out when police fired tear gas to disperse the protestors, some of whom allegedly responded by shooting weapons into the air and vandalizing patrol cars.

President Antonio Saca, of the ruling National Republican Alliance (ARENA), immediately blamed the violence on the FMLN, which staged a bloody 12-year insurgency against the government before becoming a legitimate political party in '92. Government officials have long suspected that the FMLN has maintained an armed militant wing, and President Saca promised to launch an investigation into any of the group's activities that could be aimed at destabilizing the country.

The Interior Minister also promised to take the government's complaint about the FMLN's alleged involvement in violence against the civil authorities to the UN, which had mediated the talks that led to the '92 peace accords that ended the nation's civil war.

Journalists Attacked

On 12 July, Reporters Without Borders (RWB) condemned attacks by demonstrators on at least 13 journalists during protests against public transportation and electricity price hikes that rattled the nation between 4-7 July in and near the capital city of San Salvador. The international press freedom organization expressed solidarity with the Association of El Salvadoran Journalists (APES) and issued a report of the attacks.

“These events have revealed an alarming hostility felt by part of the population towards the media,” RWB reported. “We appeal to the leaders of student movements and opposition parties to ensure respect for the principle of press freedom within their ranks, and we support the call by the APES for tolerance and respect for the work of journalists.”

RWB added: “The validity of a cause does not give its supporters the right to stigmatize the press on the alleged grounds that it does not give enough space to their cause.”

Violent Arrest of Union Activists Continues Wave of Repression

On 19 July, union leader Ricardo Monge and three other members of the healthcare workers' union (known as STISSS) were violently arrested after occupying a San Salvador hospital in protest of recent actions by the Labor Ministry. At least 200 officers of special units within the PNC (including riot police, known as the UMO) were used in the operation to remove the protestors, even though less than a dozen union members were actually in the hospital.

Photographs the next day showed the harsh treatment received by Monge and other protestors, but President Saca immediately defended the police action and said that anyone who violates the law should be forced to confront Salvadoran justice. STISSS leaders later denounced the police conduct in a press conference, saying that the UMO had entered without a court order or permission from the hospital administrators, and that no effort was made to negotiate with the peaceful protestors.

The arrest by the UMO comes on the heels of the violent 5 July protest at the National University in which two police officers were killed and a dozen people were injured. The government and the PNC have used the 5 July violence to smear the leftist FMLN party and various student organizations, and to step up its harassment of social movement activists. Indeed, a PNC spokesperson justified the presence of 200 riot police at the hospital and the violent arrests by saying that conditions had changed since 5 July.

Meanwhile, a forum against water privatization was held in El Salvador on 14 July, as labor unions, consumer groups, community organizations and representatives from international solidarity came together to strategize about stopping the government's plan to privatize the nation's public water utility. The groups pledged to continue working together on a more permanent basis, as part of a growing movement to stop the privatization plans expedited after CAFTA went into effect last Mar.

CISPES: Update on Emergency Response to Repression in El Salvador

The Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) organized protests at Salvadoran consulates in the US during the week following the violence of 5 July, and has pressured the US Congress to respond as well. During late July, two important developments took place in relation to the political repression that escalated after the 5 July police attack on student protestors.

First, CISPES and other solidarity organizations organized pressure on the US Congress to take a stand by denouncing the repression. The result was a "Dear Colleague" letter, sponsored by Representatives James McGovern and Tom Lantos, that denounced both the killing of the two policemen and the resulting state actions and repression. Some of the most important aspects of the letter are the critique of diplomatic statements (referring to the US Ambassador to El Salvador) in the days following the violence, and the call on the State Department to review the actions of the National Civilian Police, including a questioning of the tactics used in confronting protestors on 5 July.

Secondly, the repression continues in El Salvador. During late July, the water workers' union (SETA) received a death threat that listed their union, as well as the public healthcare workers' union (STISSS) and the teachers' union (ANDES), as enemies of the State. The death threat was signed by a group

calling itself “Viva mi Mayor,” a reference to the well-known and infamous founder of the Salvadoran death squads and of the ruling ARENA party, Major Roberto D'Aubuisson Arrieta, now deceased.

SETA leaders held a press conference to publicize the intimidation attempts and to call on the government to investigate and stop the threats. SETA has been very active in organizing a national coalition that brings together water workers, water users, environmentalists and other community activists to oppose the government's plans for water privatization, and union Secretary General Wilfredo Romero made clear that his union was being targeted for its resistance to State policy.

Meanwhile, the calls to stop the intimidation have fallen on deaf ears, as the Minister of the Interior, Rene Figueroa, continues throwing out verbal attacks on the opposition in an attempt to justify the continued repression, most recently claiming there is a link between the organized student groups and street gangs. However, leaders of youth organizations and the SETA union have declared that they will continue with their organizing efforts to stop the government's neoliberal policies, with the union committed to building a national movement against privatization.

—*Clifton L. Holland*