

# *MESOAMERICA*

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## **EL SALVADOR**

### **D’Abuisson Not an Honorable Citizen**

Protestors rallied outside of Congress on 15 Feb, denouncing the proposal of ruling right-wing party National Republican Alliance (ARENA) to posthumously name party founder Roberto D’Abuisson an “Honorable Citizen” of El Salvador.

D’Abuisson, who died of cancer in ’92, was accused of having been the architect behind death squads in the ’80s, and the UN Truth Commission found him responsible for the murder of Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero, who was assassinated in ’80 while conducting Mass.

The National Conciliation Party (PCN) and the Christian Democratic Party (PDC) originally backed ARENA’s proposal to honor D’Abuisson, giving this the support necessary to be placed on the congressional agenda. However, these parties withdrew their support after the outpouring of public protest.

National and international human rights organizations, including the Office of the Archbishop of El Salvador, sent letters opposing the proposal to Congress members as well as to the UN.

The proposal was removed from the congressional agenda after the PCN and PDC withdrew their support, but activists worry that ARENA might try to renew the proposal after the protests subside.

### **Three Salvadoran Congress Members Murdered in Guatemala**

Presidential spokesperson Julio Rank described the scene as “Dantesque.”

On 19 Feb, Guatemalan police found a burnt vehicle and the charred, bullet-torn bodies of three ARENA Congress members and their driver on a rural road about 22 miles outside of Guatemala City.

The legislators—Eduardo D’Abuisson (son of the notorious Roberto D’Abuisson), William Pichinte and José Ramón González—were representatives in the Central American Parliament (PARLACEN). They were traveling to a PARLACEN meeting in Guatemala City as part of a convoy accompanied by police escorts that morning, but their car disappeared at about 11:00 a.m.

after arriving in the capital. Firefighters discovered the burning car later that same day after neighbors reported a small forest fire.

On 21 Feb, four Guatemalan police officers—the chief and three other members of a special anti-organized crime unit—were arrested for killing the Salvadorans. An arrest warrant was issued for two other police officers suspected of involvement.

Four days later, the four imprisoned police officers were extra-judicially assassinated in their jail cells (see Guatemala article). Officials from both countries have suggested various motives for the killings of the Salvadoran legislators, including politics, drug-trafficking and mistaken identity.

Although Salvadoran President Tony Saca publicly expressed the possibility of a political connection shortly after the legislators were killed, he declared on 1 Mar that he was convinced that the crime was not politically motivated. Members of El Salvador's opposition parties have denounced the crime, which has brought unity to the Congress beyond political camps, according to Saca.

Salvadoran National Civil Police Director Rodrigo Ávila originally said that his country's officials would investigate the potential criminal activity of the murdered legislators if asked to do so by Guatemalan investigators. However, Ávila and Saca later dismissed the possibility that the legislators could be connected to organized crime.

In a television broadcast on 1 Mar, Ávila said that he had been informed by Guatemalan authorities that, according to confessions from the suspected police officers before they were assassinated, they had mistaken the legislators' car for one carrying drugs and money, and, when they realized their mistake, had killed the legislators and burned their bodies in an attempt to hide the evidence.

### **Bilateral Agreement with US to Fight Gangs**

While the epidemic of international *maras*, or street gangs, is a growing security threat both in cities of Central America and the US, deportations of criminals from the US and a lack of cooperation and information sharing between countries has exacerbated the situation (see feature article pgs. 6-8).

In Feb, El Salvador and the US agreed to share resources to combat street gangs in both countries. The decision is part of a region-wide collaboration with US authorities. Attorneys General Alberto González of the US and Garrid Saffie of El Salvador discussed strategies for cooperation at meetings in Washington, DC, on 26 Jan, and in San Salvador on 5 Feb.

González and Saffie agreed that the FBI and Salvadoran National Civil Police (PNC) will set up a Transnational Anti-Gang Unit; the FBI will provide special training to the PNC; regional law-enforcement agencies will share fingerprint databases and other information; US agencies, such as the Drug Enforcement Agency, will evaluate El Salvador's capacity to combat crime and prevent gang activity; and the US will send three permanent anti-gang advisors to El Salvador.

### **Protestors Denounce DR-CAFTA**

On 1 Mar, farmers, students, workers and other citizens filled the streets of San Salvador to protest the impacts of the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement with the US (DR-CAFTA), which went into effect in El Salvador one year ago.

While the ARENA government celebrated the one-year anniversary, protestors said that pact has benefited only big businesses, and that workers, small farmers and members of the informal sector have suffered. Participating organizations included the Popular Youth Bloc, the *Campesino* Movement, the Popular Social Bloc (BPS) and the National Council of Farm Workers (CNTC).

Informal street vendors led a march to the Supreme Court to present a motion of unconstitutionality to protest the economic consequences they say DR-CAFTA has produced. DR-CAFTA contains strict intellectual property protection laws, and since its implementation the Salvadoran government has cracked down on street vendors selling bootlegged CDs and DVDs. BPS member Guadalupe Erazo said: “CAFTA has affected the most vulnerable, the street vendors, the *campesinos*, the people that rely on informal sales to support their families.”

CNTC member Maximino Rodríguez said that Salvadoran farmers are at a disadvantage and cannot compete with the heavily subsidized US agricultural imports, and that this has led to an increase in extreme poverty and migration. Some factories have not prospered since the implementation of DR-CAFTA either. According to a report in the online journal, *El Faro.net*, factory exports to the US dropped 2% in '06 compared to '05.

During the public protest on 1 Mar, police arrested 27 students and community members, including two minors, for blocking a major boulevard in San Salvador.

—Honna Veerkamp