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EL SALVADOR

Wave of Criminal Violence continues to escalate

On 29 Aug, officials of the Roman Catholic Church, human rights, business and other social organizations called on government authorities to put an immediate stop to the growing wave of criminal violence that is terrorizing the nation, as seen in the escalating number **armed assaults** (an average of 500 daily), **extortions** (gang members demand daily “taxes” mainly from bus drivers and passengers and local business owners, who risk serious consequences for nonpayment) and **murders** (an average of 12 daily, according to recent police reports).

The Catholic Archbishop of San Salvador, Fernando Sáenz, stated: “I believe that it is obvious that violence is a subject that concerns everyone, that we all must contribute to eradicating this problem, and that the civil authorities must take appropriate measures to immediately stop the delinquency that is affecting us all.”

Beatrice Alamanni, the nation’s Human Rights Attorney, argued: “Gangs are not the only problem here; we must also focus on organized crime and common delinquency, which mixed together has created a serious problem of insecurity that the police authorities have not been able to control.”

Human rights leaders argue that President Elías Antonio Saca’s promise to find a solution to the increasing criminal violence has not been fulfilled since he took office in June ’04 (Vol. 25, No. 6), even after implementing his “Super Iron Fist” policy in July ’04 that imposed harsher punishment on convicted criminals known to be gang members (Vol. 23, No. 8).

During July ’06, religious and social organizations held many rallies in major cities to denounce the violence and to demand peace, with slogans such as: “All of us are called upon to be peacemakers and to end the violence; if you want peace, you must respect life.”

FMLN Leaders Murdered

The Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) reported on 29 Aug, that Alex

Flores Montoya and his wife Mercedes Peñate, two well-known Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) leaders, were found dead on 23 Aug in the municipality of Coatepeque, department of Santa Ana.

While traveling in their vehicle, the couple was intercepted by armed men in another vehicle; then they were forced to lay face down on the ground, and each was shot with a single bullet to the head and left in a nearby alley. Montoya was a teacher in two of the local public schools, he served as the local FMLN board's adjunct coordinator, and he campaigned for a post on the municipal council with the FMLN in the Mar '06 elections. Peñate was also a recognized FMLN activist and a candidate for the municipal council in the Mar '00 elections.

The FMLN denounced the death squad-style killings and demanded a prompt and thorough investigation by the National Civilian Police (PNC) and the Attorney General's Office. Luis Corvera, FMLN coordinator for the department of Santa Ana, stated that the crime "cannot remain unpunished." Corvera expressed the concerns of many Salvadorans saying that the murders are most likely political because the way in which the Montoyas were killed is typical of Salvadoran death squads in the '80s.

Political violence in El Salvador has escalated since 5 July, when riot police attacked student demonstrators who were protesting the rising cost of bus fares; two police officers were killed by a renegade leftist sniper and a dozen people were injured (Vol. 25, No. 8). A CISPES bulletin alleged that the PNC illegally raided the union federation CSTS, tortured and illegally detained union leader Daniel Ernesto Morales on 5 July, and that on 17 July the water department worker's union SETA received a death threat signed by a supposed death squad group.

Since 5 July, two "social-cleansing" death squads have reemerged in the western part of the country, and the Salvadoran Army, spurred on by the ruling National Republican Alliance's (ARENA) rhetoric that has been calling the FMLN and its supporters "terrorists," illegally occupied a rural community in San Vicente, while claiming they were looking for illegal weapons.

Meanwhile, CISPES reported that nothing has been done in the investigation of the recent brutal murder of FMLN leader "Mariposa" Marina Manzanares' parents in Suchitoto on 1 July, and that the government has done nothing to address the allegations of death squad-like groups operating within the PNC.

In the context of this alleged "escalating repression," the FMLN and many Salvadoran social organizations are calling for international solidarity to pressure the Attorney General's office for a prompt and thorough investigation of the recent murders.

CAFTA Repercussions in El Salvador: New labor violations in Maquila Sector

CISPES denounced that government-sanctioned labor violations in the *maquila* (garment assembly) factories continue in the shadow of CAFTA, and the labor movement fears an increase in such violations once CAFTA is more fully implemented. Social movement leaders argue that ARENA's agenda is to make the country a source of cheap labor in order to attract foreign investment, and the government does not have the political will or capacity to ensure basic labor standards, labor violations are expected to become even more rampant when more international capital does in fact arrive. For the time being, the

governing ARENA party continues to guarantee poverty wages and union-busting tactics for the *maquila* industry in particular, and for Salvadoran society as a whole.

Two events signify grave times ahead for women working in *maquilas*. First, in early Aug about 400 women who work in the *maquiladora* “Quality SA de CV” took over their factory when the owner attempted to relocate the workers from San Salvador to Santa Ana, a little more than an hour away. The minimum wage in Santa Ana is lower, the workers would have to travel more than two hours a day, and they are already regularly forced to work overtime. Even worse, working in another *maquiladora* under a different name would allow the company to default on the workers’ years of earned benefits. The women have taken direct action to block the *maquila* owner’s attempts to take out company machinery and are committed to maintaining the takeover until they are allowed to resume work in San Salvador or are given severance pay according to the law.

Meanwhile, workers from the Hermosa factory—a *maquiladora* that manufactured clothing for Reebok and Adidas—are preparing for their upcoming court hearing on 1 Sep against the *maquila* owner, Montalvo Machado. The workers have been fighting for more than a year now, both in the streets and in lengthy legal cases ridden with corruption and government complicity, regarding labor violations. More than 600 workers, most of whom had worked there for more than 10 years, were left without work, severance pay and years of earned benefits when Machado closed the Hermosa plant in ’04 and set up a new shop under a different name. The illegally fired workers then unionized under harsh conditions. The 1 Sep hearing in the case against Montalvo is one of the few remaining cases open, and the workers are calling for international solidarity in the form of political pressure on the government of El Salvador to comply with the law and respect workers’ rights.

Minimal Minimum Wage Increase

After a great deal of media fanfare, on 16 Aug the government finally announced what ended up being a small increase in the country’s minimum wage: 10% for the commercial and service sectors (from an average of \$156.60 to \$172.26 monthly) and 4% for the *maquila* sector (from \$151.25 to \$157.30 monthly). The increase comes after a 25% increase in bus fares, 14% in electricity, and other skyrocketing living expenses. The increase is expected to benefit only 15% of the working population because most workers earn below minimum wage in the informal sector. Meanwhile, the *maquila* workers are wondering what they can possibly cover with the additional \$6.05 they expect to receive monthly.

Battle over ILO Agreements Continues

Conventions 87 and 98 of the International Labor Organization (ILO)—concerning freedom of association, the protection of the right to organize, and the right to bargain collectively—are currently being debated in El Salvador’s Legislative Assembly. The debate about the ILO conventions, which date from ’48 and ’49, started months ago when the European Union hinted that El Salvador would be excluded from General System of Preferences benefits—that allow the country to export at reduced import tariffs to Europe—if it failed to ratify the ILO conventions.

ARENA has delayed the ratification as long as possible, arguing that constitutional reforms (which would require approval by two separate Legislative Assemblies) and a series of reforms to secondary

laws are needed in order to ratify the ILO conventions. However, the Salvadoran labor movement and the FMLN argue that these reforms are not only unnecessary, but would violate and undermine the spirit of the conventions. “Salvadoran companies and transnational corporations, which have been institutionalizing labor flexibilization, are threatened by the ratification of the ILO agreements,” stated Wilfredo Berrios, a leader of the Salvadoran Labor Front (FSS). The FSS and other social movement groups were planning to gather the last week of Aug at the Legislative Assembly to pressure for ratification of the conventions, without disputed reforms.

—*Clifton L. Holland*