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## **El Salvador's President Receives Church Award Many Believe Is Undeserved**

*by LADB Staff*

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El Salvador's President Antonio Saca has received the 2008 Path to Peace award from the Path to Peace Foundation, an agency established in 1991 in support of the Holy See's Permanent Observer Mission to the UN. Archbishop Celestino Migliore, permanent observer of the Holy See to the UN and president of the foundation, announced the unanimous selection of Saca by the organization's board in New York.

In El Salvador, the announcement was met with revulsion in many quarters. Some of Saca's achievements were cited in the foundation's official announcement, which said: "One of his first actions as president was to appoint a commissioner for democratic governing, who, in turn, created a group that includes representatives of all the political parties to discuss and find solutions to issues of national interest. He also introduced reforms in the law pertaining to the judicial sector and others aimed at reducing delinquency, approved fiscal reform, and has traced out 'the map of poverty' that identifies the areas of extreme poverty in order to work towards eradicating it." Saca arrived in New York June 7 to participate in a UN AIDS conference. On June 10 he gave a speech on the subject and that evening was given the award.

In El Salvador, Las Comunidades Eclesiales de Base de El Salvador (CEBES) was furious at the choice. CEBES counts some 150 Christian base communities throughout the country among its membership. The organization announced its "rejection" of the award with the statement: "Impunity in our country continues being the usual practice, and the clearest confirmation of that can be observed in the deficient investigation of crime that does not permit appropriate justice for victims." During his four-year term, said CEBES, Saca "has never demonstrated openness to the country's poorest." For that reason, the organization said the church's choice "does not correspond to the vision of the gospel." The CEBES statement was in the form of a letter to the Apostolic Nunciature in El Salvador, and it took the church further to task for "inequalities, exclusion, and poverty," which have worsened during Saca's term, while "insecurity and impunity have become widespread."

In a separate statement, Miguel Angel Guzman of CEBES told Inter Press Service he was "outraged because, rather than working for peace, Saca has focused on building a positive image of himself and the party he represents." Guzman pointed to Saca's failure even to make progress in crimes against the church, the most celebrated example of which is the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero in 1980.

There has been no progress on this case despite an order of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to make a "thorough investigation of the crime, make reparations to the victims, and adjust local legislation to the American Convention on Human Rights." That adjustment, said Guzman, required annulling the 1993 general amnesty law. Under that law, there

could be no trials of those responsible for killing civilians. According to the report of the Truth Commission mandated by the peace accords, most of these killings were committed by the military or paramilitary groups.

Maria Silvia Guillen is head of the Fundacion de Estudios para la Aplicacion del Derecho (FESPAD). She said this award "shows a lack of respect" for the Salvadoran people. She said, "Either the foundation is misinformed, or they are going to decorate the president for nonexistent achievements," and she noted that during this administration "social protest has been criminalized and crime rates have shot up (see NotiCen, 2007-06-14 and 2008-04-24), with murder rates at unprecedented levels." IPS quoted official figures as showing that the murder rate rose from 36 to 52 per 100,000 population.

Political scientist Hector Dada Hirezi, director general of Cambio Democratico political party, added to the opprobrium, saying, "I can find no explanation for this award, especially coming from the Vatican, because Saca has been a factor of national division rather than unity." Parsing the foundation's announcement of the award, he explained that the appointment of a commissioner for democratic governing was meaningless. "Saca appointed Gloria Salguero as his commissioner for governance, that didn't mean there was a genuine intention to enter into dialogue," he said. "We [Cambio Democratico] participated in the interparty discussions and ended up frustrated at the government's total lack of political will. The clearest proof is that the dialogue process is dead."

### *A pattern emerges*

While long on dismay, representatives of these sectors did not offer much in the way of explanation for the foundation's choice, but history provides context. Past recipients from the region have included former President of Nicaragua Violeta de Chamorro in 1997, former President of Venezuela Rafael Caldera in 1998, and former President of Argentina Carlos Menem in 1999. More recent context would include the latest polls on the March 2009 general election in El Salvador.

A June 10 survey from the Universidad Tecnologica (UTEC) showed a massive shift to the left, away from Saca's Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) party for the first time in postwar history; 48.3% of those who intend to vote would do so for the Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN), while ARENA would get just 29.8%. The leftist party would fare equally well in the municipal and legislative elections. The poll was taken June 6-8 and sampled 2,096 people. This poll also asked respondents for a rating from 1-10 of Saca's performance in office. They gave him a 5.7. Most cited social programs that did not help them.

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