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An intimidating pre-dawn attack on a San Salvador human rights organization has turned new attention to the still divisive legacy of El Salvador’s dozen-year civil war (1980-1992), which involved numerous abuses and atrocities and resulted in an estimated 75,000 deaths and 8,000 disappearances.

Many of the missing were children whose parents were killed or who—in the mayhem of conflict—were separated from their families and scattered to unknown whereabouts. Others were snatched by military personnel or scuttled into orphanages and later adopted, often by families in the US and Europe.

Using DNA evidence and "shoe-leather detective work," as a 2011 Los Angeles Times article explained, the group Asociación Pro-Búsqueda de Niñas y Niños Desaparecidos de El Salvador has managed to track down several hundred of the missing children—in some cases reuniting families, at other times confirming the deaths of the disappeared.

The organization’s efforts have earned it plenty of accolades. The aforementioned profile piece is a case in point. "Investigators hunt leads in dog-eared adoption files and photos from orphanages that operated during the conflict," reporter Ken Elllingwood wrote. "They tramp onetime conflict zones to trace last known steps and prod residents to recall traumatic, long-ago events. They venture into the most remote corners of the countryside, despite the presence of drug traffickers and dangerous gangs."

Since its founding in 1994, however, Pro-Búsqueda has also made its share of enemies, some of whom, presumably, are responsible for a Nov. 14 attack on the organization’s San Salvador offices. Witnesses say three armed men forced their way into the facility, threatening and tying up a handful of employees and then setting fire to some of Pro-Búsqueda’s archives. The unknown assailants also stole computers containing sensitive legal information.

"We’re stunned by what has occurred," the organization’s director, Ester Alvarenga, told reporters. "We’ve done valuable work that no one else in this country wanted to do. Our track record speaks for itself: 187 cases resolved, two convictions and another one the way. So many years of work and dedication."

**Familiar modus operandi**

President Mauricio Funes, who lost a brother during the conflict, condemned the attack, calling it a "criminal act" and promising a thorough investigation. He described the information theft as "worrysome" and acknowledged that Pro-Búsqueda’s work "has probably made people who in the past were responsible for things considered to be serious human rights violations uncomfortable."

David Morales, El Salvador’s human rights ombud, was even more forthright in his assessment. The operation was "obviously planned" and carried out "with a clear goal in mind," he explained. The
perpetrators followed a "modus operandi ... that we haven’t seen for years in El Salvador, one that was typical of the civil war years," Morales went on to say. "They were looking to intimidate human rights defenders."

What is particularly telling, say observers, is the timing of the incident. For the past two decades, Salvadoran authorities have taken a "let-sleeping-dogs-lie" position regarding the war era’s many human rights violations. The approach was institutionalized by a blanket amnesty law that was rushed into place in 1993 at the behest of then President Alfredo Cristiani (1989-1994). Cristiani, still an active figure in national politics, heads El Salvador’s leading opposition party, the hard-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA).

ARENA dominated post-war politics until 2009, when Funes—a former television journalist who cut his professional teeth covering the civil conflict—gave the left-wing Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) its first presidency. So far the amnesty law has survived the political transition. Pressure against it, however, is beginning to build.

Late last year, the Costa-Rica based Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR)—as part of a landmark ruling regarding the notorious 1981 El Mozote massacre—dismissed the amnesty law as inapplicable in cases that constitute crimes against humanity (NotiCen, Jan. 17, 2013). The controversial statute took another hit this past September, when the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) agreed to consider arguments presented against the amnesty law by a collection of Salvadoran rights groups who say it is unconstitutional and should therefore be repealed.

**burying the evidence**

Shortly after the CSJ admitted the suit, El Salvador’s Catholic Church abruptly shuttered one of the country’s key human rights institutions, the Tutela Legal del Arzobispado (NotiCen, Oct. 24, 2013). The Tutela, founded by slain Archbishop Óscar Romero, was as thorough as it was iconic, collecting some 50,000 documents pertaining to rights violations committed before, during, and after the war. The fate of those documents is now very much up in the air.

Critics of the closure say the timing of events—the Tutela was closed just 10 days after the CSJ decision went public—could hardly have been a coincidence. The same goes for the attack on Pro-Búsqueda, which occurred just weeks after the surprising Tutela shutdown. If the CSJ does eventually strike down the amnesty law, prosecutors will finally be able to take El Salvador’s war-era human rights violators to task. To secure convictions, however, they will need proof, which is where the many testimonies and other documents collected by Tutela, Pro-Búsqueda, and other rights groups come in.

"It’s really important to understand that since [the amnesty law went into effect], literally no one has been brought to justice or brought to criminal charges in El Salvador for any of the human rights atrocities that happened," Alexis Stoumbelis, executive director of the Washington DC-based activist organization Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), explained in a recent interview with the Democracy Now! radio program. "It certainly looks like the right-wing oligarchy, who ... stand to lose the most if the Amnesty Law is ever overturned, are reaching increasingly violent and desperate measures to make sure that that evidence never comes to light," she added.

Pro-Búsqueda’s Ester Alvarenga described last month’s attack on her organization as a clear case of "sabotage." She insists, however, that the organization will continue to investigate the country’s
many missing-children cases. She also said Pro-Búsqueda has electronic backup copies of the files that were torched.

Still, rights groups say it is imperative that Salvadoran authorities do everything in their power to investigate the break-in and hopefully identify the people responsible. Failure to do so, they say, will simply reinforce an already pervasive sense in El Salvador that impunity—particularly as it relates to human rights cases—is inevitable.

"Since the Peace Accords, El Salvador has been experimenting with a negotiated peace without justice," Noah Bullock, executive director of the San Salvador-based community development organization Foundation Cristosal, told the Episcopal New Service. "Attacks like the one against Pro-Búsqueda last week indicate that the elements of society involved in perpetrating those crimes continue to believe that they can operate above the law with impunity. The burning of human rights offices is not behavior conducive to building a peaceful and democratic society."

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