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Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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Secret Salvadoran ‘Hit List’ Shines New Light On Civil War Rights Abuses

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
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A leaked intelligence report from the 1980s has opened a revealing crack in the wall of official secrecy that continues to surround the Salvadoran military’s involvement in widespread human rights violations committed during the country’s dozen-year civil war (1980-1992).

The first such document ever to be made public, the Libro Amarillo (Yellow Book) appears to have been a target list of people the armed forces deemed to be enemies of the state. The 270-page report, compiled by intelligence officers with the Estado Mayor Conjunto de la Fuerza Armada Salvadoreña, the military’s high command, contains the names, nicknames, and photographs of nearly 2,000 individuals. It refers to the targets as "criminal terrorists." Inscribed on the document’s cover is a handwritten message urging readers to "make copies of the photographs and put them on your bulletin board so you will know your enemies."

Many of the people listed, including current Salvadoran President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, were affiliated with the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), a coalition of left-wing guerilla factions that re-established itself at the end of the conflict as a legal political party. Sánchez Cerén came to power this past June after serving as vice president under President Mauricio Funes (2009-2014), also of the FMLN (NotiCen, June 19, 2014). During the war, Sánchez Cerén was a leading rebel commander known as "Comandante Leonel González." Other targets mentioned in the intelligence report were union leaders, political figures, and human rights advocates.

A photocopy of the top secret Libro Amarillo first surfaced in 2011 (it was reportedly discovered by an individual who was moving) but was withheld from the general public so that analysts could study it, confirm its authenticity, and cross-reference the names it included with historical records pertaining to extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, disappearances, and other war-era rights abuses.

Finally, on Sept. 28, a team of experts from George Washington University’s National Security Archive, the University of Washington Center for Human Rights (UWCHR), and the Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG), all in the US, published the document online. The researchers described it as "the only evidence to appear from the Salvadoran Army’s own files of the surveillance methods used by security forces to target Salvadoran citizens during the country’s 12-year civil war."

By referencing the enemy list against various historical databases—including information compiled by the Tutela Legal del Arzobispado, a key Salvadoran human rights institution suspiciously shuttered last year (NotiCen, Oct. 24, 2013)—the team found that 15% of the names corresponded to documented killings or extrajudicial killings, 13% to cases of forced disappearance, 15% to claims regarding torture, and 29% to reports of arrest and/or detainment. Taken together, the numbers suggest that approximately 43% of those named in the report suffered at least some kind of abuse at the hands of the state.

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More where that came from?

Rights groups say the publication is an important step in their decades-long quest to uncover the truth behind El Salvador’s many war abuses and end the impunity that the surviving perpetrators of those crimes have so long enjoyed. The Libro Amarillo also raises the possibility that—despite denials by the armed forces—there may be other pertinent military documents cached away somewhere.

"It strengthens the hypothesis that there are files pertaining to military operations that were carried out during the armed conflict and involved massacres, sexual attacks, disappearances of boys and girls, and forced displacements of the civilian population," Mirla Carbajal, an attorney with the Instituto de Derechos Humanos de la Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (IDHUCA), recently wrote.

Others say the Libro Amarillo provides a "missing link" between the armed forces and the supposedly independent death squads that operated at the time and to which many of era’s extrajudicial killings and disappearances were attributed.

"A document like this, I think, confirms what most people thought at the time, that the ... intelligence unit of the high command was putting together the list of targets," William LeoGrande, an American University professor, author, and Latin America expert, told Al Jazeera last year. "Then those targets were being passed along to the special operations units, the death squads that would go out and kill them."

"By no means a coincidence"

Interestingly, the Libro Amarillo leak took place less than a month before El Salvador was elected for the first time to serve in the 47-member UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva, Switzerland. The two-year temporary membership begins Jan. 1, 2015.

Calling it "an important diplomatic achievement," Foreign Minister Hugo Martínez hailed the decision as evidence of the country’s progress in recent years (since the FMLN took over leadership of the country starting in 2009) in areas such as health care, education, political reform, and women’s rights, a key policy focus under during the Funes administration (NotiCen, May 12, 2011, and Aug. 22, 2013). "The support El Salvador received to join the Council was by no means a coincidence," Martínez wrote in an opinion piece published Oct. 26 in the Salvadoran daily El Diario de Hoy.

Many observers, nevertheless, see El Salvador’s election to the UNHRC as an odd development given how limited progress has been on what continues to be the country’s highest profile human rights issue: the civil war legacy.

The civil war, which pitted the country’s US-backed armed forces against FMLN-affiliated rebel groups, claimed an estimated 75,000 lives and resulted in the "disappearance" of 8,000 others. UN-brokered peace accords signed in 1992 led to a Truth Commission that, in a report published in 1993, attributed most of the violence (85%) to state agents. The violence included not just assassinations and disappearances but also state-authored atrocities such as the El Mozote massacre, carried out over a three-day span in late 1981 (NotiCen, Jan. 17, 2013), and the murders on Nov. 16, 1989, of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her adolescent daughter (NotiCen, Oct. 2, 1991).
Just days after the Truth Commission report went public, then President Alfredo Cristiani (1989-1994) of the hard-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) implemented an amnesty law. More than two decades later, the law continues to protect perpetrators of El Salvador’s many war-era crimes from prosecution (NotiCen, April 11, 2013).

**The enduring amnesty law**

The government’s relationship vis-à-vis the civil war legacy has shifted since the FMLN assumed control of the government in 2009. President Funes, a former journalist who cut his professional teeth covering the war, made a number of symbolic gestures on behalf of the conflict’s many victims, most notably by visiting the site of the El Mozote massacre, where as many as 1,000 villagers were butchered, and apologizing on behalf of the state (NotiCen, Feb. 23, 2012).

His successor, President Sánchez Cerén, has also demonstrated solidarity with war victims. Shortly after taking office, he welcomed a group of rights defenders and war victims into the Residencia Presidencial for the first in a series of "citizen meetings" he and his wife, first lady Margarita Villalta de Sánchez, are hosting on a fortnightly basis (NotiCen, July 17, 2014). The very next day he announced the formation of a special committee, the Consejo Directivo para Reparación de Víctimas de Violaciones de Derechos Humanos durante el Conflicto Armado, tasked with identifying civilian war victims and developing mechanisms to offer reparations.

But what the two leaders haven’t done—much to the dismay of rights groups, victims associations, and international agencies, including branches of the UN—is heed calls to overturn the much-maligned amnesty law. Human rights violators, as a result, continue to enjoy total impunity in El Salvador while victims seeking legal recourse must look beyond the country’s borders: in Spain, for example, where a judge with the Audiencia Nacional indicted 19 people in connection with the Jesuit massacre (NotiCen, July 28, 2011), and in the US, where one of the men named in the Spanish case, a retired colonel, was jailed last year for immigration violations (NotiCen, Sept. 26, 2013).

"What’s needed is the courage to do what’s right," Salil Shetty, secretary general of the influential rights group Amnesty International (AI), said in a recent interview with the independent news portal El Faro. "When you open old wounds, there’s acute pain in the short term. But if you don’t open [those wounds], an abscess forms, one that will require major surgery in the long term. And so there’s a choice to be made."

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