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El Salvador: Notes On Recent Human Rights Violations

by Deborah Tyroler

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March 1: Hilario Perez, 38, a worker in a Catholic- sponsored health program in San Francisco Gotera, Morazan department, was taken into custody by soldiers in the village of El Rusio, Calavera canton, Cacaopera jurisdiction. He was carrying medicines and educational materials at the time of his capture. A witness reported that in the town of Corinto, Perez was seen entering a military helicopter. The case was reported to Tutela Legal (San Salvador Archdiocese human rights legal office), and the International Committee for the Red Cross. Tutela Legal inquired at the barracks of the Third Infantry Brigade, San Miguel; Fourth Military Detachment, San Francisco Gotera; National Police; and Arce Battalion, San Miguel. March 10: In San Salvador, Humberto Centeno, General Secretary of ASTTEL, the Telecommunication Workers Union, was captured by Air Force personnel and hauled off in a truck. Centeno's capture occurred after a meeting between 30 to 40 members of the CST and CCTEM, two major Salvadoran labor confederations, and Labor Ministry representatives. According to witnesses, Centeno was beaten before Air Force troops removed him from the premises. Centeno's two sons, Vladimir and Jaime Centeno, are in prison under charges of kidnapping a Colonel's son. The two claim they are innocent. During the meeting, ministry guards threatened the unionists with guns. The minister became extremely agitated and threw a chair through a window, cutting himself in the process. This incident apparently brought about the arrival of about 80 Treasury Police, who then refused to permit the labor representatives to leave. Many were later taken away in buses. Subsequently, about 100 Air Force troops arrived and aimed their guns at a crowd which had congregated outside the ministry. Many in the crowd were members of the UNTS. After the incident at the Labor Ministry, the minister had an emergency meeting with President Jose Napoleon Duarte. The two appeared on television claiming that the CST members were armed, and that their organization was a front for the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). These charges are tantamount to a death sentence and a license for the death squads to victimize any member of the CST. By March 25, after interrogation and torture, Centeno had been released. ASTTEL has been under attack from the government and military since late 1986. During the first week of March the founder of ASTTEL was murdered on a public bus by unknown assailants. March 13: Humberto Rivera Alvarenga, 43, Ernestina Ayala Recinos, and Ayala's two sons, ages one and four, were taken into custody by soldiers of the Atlacatl Battalion in Las Vueltas, Chalatenango department. The four were captured during a military operation in the area which began on March 6. After Army units, totaling 1,200 troops, were helicoptered in, soldiers entered Las Vueltas, search several houses, threatened residents, and remained in the village until March 9. On March 12 soldiers returned to Las Vueltas, and remained overnight. The next day they conducted a house- to-house search, discovering a small cache of money in the home of Rivera Alvarenga, the community treasurer. The soldiers accused Rivera Alvarenga of theft. An estimated 150 community residents gathered to demand his release, arguing that he was not guilty of wrongdoing. As treasurer, Rivera often kept community funds at his home for short periods of time. In response to this show of support, the Army declared a state of emergency at 5:00 p.m. Residents were given 15 minutes to return to their homes. Troops remained in the surrounding area until March 15. The four detainees were taken by helicopter to the barracks of the Fourth Infantry Brigade in El Paraiso, and later transferred to Treasury Police headquarters in San Salvador.

In October 1987, 1,074 Salvadoran refugees from the Mesa Grande refugee camp in Honduras returned to Las Vueltas. The community participates in programs sponsored by the Archdiocese of San Salvador. March 16: Rivera Alvarenga, Ayala Recinos and her two children were released to the custody of the governmental Human Rights Commission. Money confiscated by soldiers from Rivera Alvarenga's home was not returned by the Treasury Police. Community and local organizations said they would initiate legal actions to retrieve the money. March 23: Pedro Ortiz, a catechist in the Catholic parish of Maria Madre de los Pobres on the outskirts of San Salvador, was taken into custody by the National Police in Suchitoto, Cuscatlan department. Ortiz was captured when traveling by bus from San Antonio El Barillo, and later transferred to the barracks of the First Infantry Brigade in San Carlos, San Salvador. He was reportedly released before March 26. March 25: The whereabouts of Hilario Perez remain unknown. According to Tutela Legal, he is now considered "disappeared." [Basic data from 03/17/88, 03/25/88 newsbriefs by CUANES (Christian Urgent Action Network for Emergency Support/El Salvador, Evanston, IL). CUANES responds to human rights cases affecting the personnel and ministries of the churches of El Salvador at the request of appropriate church leadership.]

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