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Deborah Tyroler

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Amnesty International: Salvadoran Security Forces Responsible For Hundreds Of Killings In Past 2 Years

by Deborah Tyroler

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This week the London-based human rights organization, Amnesty International, released a report stating that Salvadoran security forces have killed hundreds of leftist suspects in a resumption of death squad activities during the past two years. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, security forces abducted and summarily executed tens of thousands of suspected leftists. The killings dropped off after President Jose Napoleon Duarte came to power in 1984. According to the Salvadoran government, such killings are the work of "extremists" who act independently and cannot be apprehended. Amnesty International's report disagrees: "[E]vidence gathered over many years from a wide range of sources points to security force responsibility." The report said that death squads usually wear plain clothes, use unmarked vans or trucks with tinted windows, and often dump mutilated the mutilated bodies of their victims on the roadside "as a means of terrifying the population." Some victims, said Amnesty, are shot from passing cars in daylight in front of witnesses, while others are seized from their homes or in the street and "never heard from again" or turn up in notorious "body dumps." In the early 1980s, bodies were dumped at El Playon, a lava bed 12 miles north of San Salvador. This location apparently fell into disuse until an unidentified body was found there in January this year, said the report. Next, bodies are again being found at a site known as the Devil's Doorway at Panchimalco, 12 miles southeast of the capital, according to Amnesty. The report refuted the Salvadoran government's version of events by asserting that the killings "are routinely carried out by regular units of the armed forces which include the military and the security services, and by special intelligence units that incorporate civilian gunmen under their supervision and control." In 1987, an average of 12 bodies a month "showing death squad-style mutilations" such as decapitation, strangulation, dismemberment, bearing signs of rape or torture were found dumped along roadsides, said the report. According to estimates by Tutela Legal, the Salvadoran Catholic Church's human rights organization based in the capital, as many death squad-style disappearances and killings occurred in the first quarter of 1988 than throughout the whole of 1987. The report said that since early last year, death squad victims have included trade union members, human rights workers, returned refugees, and members of the judiciary who attempted to establish responsibility for human rights violations. Amnesty pointed out that many the abductions and attacks have occurred near military or police installations "or under the gaze of uniformed security personnel who made no effort to intervene." Other deliberate murders, said the report, were falsely attributed by armed forces spokespersons to clashes with the rebels. Standard methods of death squad intimidation, said the report, are the publication of "death lists" in newspaper advertisements and delivering coffins to the homes of intended victims. The revitalization of the death squads, said Amnesty, has coincided with high-level military officers' public opposition to the policies of President Duarte, including his negotiations with the rebel forces. The report stated that the assassination a year ago of Herbert Anaya, president of the Salvadoran Human Rights Commission, "was widely interpreted as an attempt to hamper these negotiations." Other factors coinciding with the resurgence of death squad activities, said Amnesty International, were reports last summer of Duarte's terminal cancer, "affording the armed forces even greater control over

counter-insurgency policies"; and, the release of most of the country's more than 400 political prisoners in October 1987, an outcome of the August 1987 regional peace plan. (Basic data from reports by AP, 10/25/88, 10/26/88)

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