

3-8-1989

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Recommended Citation

Tyroler, Deborah. "On Human Rights Abuses In El Salvador." (1989). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/2807>

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On Human Rights Abuses In El Salvador

by Deborah Tyroler

Category/Department: General

Published: Wednesday, March 8, 1989

According to a March 3 report by the Roman Catholic Church's Tutela Legal office in San Salvador, the air force has threatened to resume bombing contested areas, forcing civilians living in those areas to flee in rising numbers. The report asserted that in the past month, death squad killings have increased. In January, three death squads, including the Anti- Communist Revolutionary Extermination League, announced they were resuming operations by publishing death lists of presumed leftists. The New York Times cited office director Maria Julia Hernandez as saying that human rights violations had increased since last November. Tutela Legal reported that the army routinely picks up peasants living in areas dominated by the rebels and holds them for more than the constitutionally permitted 72 hours. Many are arrested almost every time they leave their villages. The army's objective is reportedly to persuade neighbors that the peasants are cooperating with the armed forces and to sow suspicion behind enemy lines. Next, the Times reported that the guerrillas have stepped up pressure on civilians to take sides. In what the government called the first mass expulsion of peasants living in rebel-controlled territory, in November the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) reportedly drove 110 farmers from their homes in Nahuaterique, Morazan department. Tutela Legal has reported that deaths from human rights violations rose to 261 in 1988 from 156 in 1987, a 67% increase. The March 3 report put most of the blame on government forces, stating that they had killed twice as many people as the rebels. The increase in rebel killings, however, was slightly higher. The report said killings by rightist death squads, which often are linked to government security forces, rose by 150%, the highest rate. (Basic data from New York Times, 03/04/89, 03/05/89)

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