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by Deborah Tyroler

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[The article below was distributed by the Pacific News Service during the week of March 13-19. The LADB has authorization from PNS for reproduction.] By Beatriz Johnston Hernandez SAN FRANCISCO "We'll spend next Christmas in San Salvador," political exile Joaquin Dominguez tells a friend. They have been discussing the recent rejection of a rebel peace proposal by the US-backed government of Jose Napoleon Duarte. Dominguez says he has waited nine years to say such a thing he will return by December. Dominguez's determination counters the pessimism of many other observers who predicted the March 19 presidential elections would touch off a new and more bloody round of violence. Dominguez did not disagree. "A lot of people are going to die, and the best are going to die." But, he says, that's the short run. Dominguez has lived the Salvadoran civil war throughout first as an attorney working on agricultural reform, then as a political refugee and immigrant activist in the United States, now as a refugee in Nicaragua working closely with Salvadoran rebel strategists. The intense war weariness of the Salvadoran people combined with other unprecedented elements, makes this a critical year for his country, Dominguez says. "The US government has no plan for El Salvador," he notes, citing recent reports. "Its last card, the Duarte government, is discredited; its army insurrectional and fatigued. The [anticipated] victory by the rightwing ARENA party is sure to bring with it more repression and more [popular] insurrection." The Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), for its part, is promising a major escalation of its current offensive, which Dominguez calls "the coup de grace to a moribund beast." Dominguez, 40, could have returned to his country before 1989, of course, but that would have meant returning also to dangers he fled. In the El Salvador of 1979, when the military government was reportedly killing 1,000 peasants a month over the issue of land, Dominguez was a government attorney overseeing the land reform project. In the doctoral thesis he was working on, Dominguez recommended that the government nationalize not only large and small-sized land holdings, but also the mid-size properties, or the most productive land. He was arrested, and then released. He was detained again by plainclothesmen brandishing machine-guns. He fled. Some Peace Corps friends arranged a student visa for Dominguez. Two weeks after his escape, he was on a plane for Washington, DC. From the start, Dominguez, like thousands of fellow exiles, never planned on making the United States a final home. During the nine years in the US, he never bought a car on monthly installments. He collected too many travel bags and suitcases. He never quite got the hang of preparing for cold winters. "Tropical skin," he says, pointing to his tanned arm, "gets a rash by wearing too many clothes and coverings and coats." Dominguez, bearded and bespectacled, usually wears billowy linen shirts and khaki denim jackets. "I remember it was below zero in Washington," says Patrice Perillie, an immigration attorney, "and here was this person with white cotton pants, no socks, a shirt, a light sweater. I was amazed how totally out of place he was." As clients at her law firm told their stories of persecution, Dominguez wanted a free legal service for Salvadorans and Guatemalans. Perillie and Dominguez started CARECEN, diving into the task of filing requests for political refugees. There was no money. Dominguez worked in a restaurant from midnight to 6 a.m. and walked off with stolen food in garbage bags to feed himself. He used money
he saved in this way for CARECEN. On March 24, 1981, he became one of the first four Central American refugees to be given sanctuary by Rev. John Steinbrook, at Luther Place Church, in front of the White House and ABC national news cameras. Two years later, CARECEN was a national organization. Joseph Azar, a Wall Street attorney, established the New York CARECEN. The legal center was set up in Los Angeles, Houston and finally San Francisco, where Dominguez came to live five years ago. Meanwhile his handbook, "The Wetback Code," was smuggled into Immigration and Naturalization Service's detention cells in El Centro and Brownsville. The pamphlet is a set of 12 rules some relate to immigrants' rights when confronting the INS. One rule says: "Don't forget people in the home country while here." Dominguez never forgot. When CARECEN delegates would return from El Salvador, Dominguez would take one aside and ask: "What's the weather like right now? Are the trees flowering? What does the city look like?" To himself, he says, he would try to picture San Salvador without some of the streets he knew. He wondered which of his friends were still around. His family... Last year, Dominguez left in new hands CARECEN and two other organizations he helped establish. He gave away his sweaters, all of them, he says, and left for Nicaragua close enough to El Salvador. In Nicaragua, Dominguez says, he's learning again to live with need. "We lack many things. We didn't have gas during the entire month of December, for example, but there's great spiritual richness." Dominguez has founded a cultural organization to promote Salvadoran writers and artists he's a sculptor himself. He also serves as an attache to the Salvadoran insurgency's human rights corp in Nicaragua. "I can see Joaquin being a major figure in the New El Salvador," Perillie says. "I can see him as the next Minister of Culture, of the Interior, Mayor of San Salvador. He has that way of living his life." Dominguez says "Minister of anything" is too pretentious. He sees himself as "just another Salvadoran exile," working to find his way back home.

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