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## **Analysis: Open Season On Journalists Resumes In El Salvador**

*by Deborah Tyroler*

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[The article below was distributed by the Pacific News Service on 03/20-26/89. The LADB has authorization from PNS for reproduction.] By Mary Jo McConahay SAN SALVADOR When three journalists were killed by the Salvadoran military within the first 12 hours of election day, the international press corps reacted with shock but not surprise. In the fierce early years of the war, from 1980 to 1984, some 25 journalists died most of them assassinated. Forces have once again been building here that led veterans of the Salvadoran story to suspect the open season on reporters was about to return. "You can't separate these new attacks from the way tension is growing and the war is escalating again," said a US photojournalist who has covered the region since 1981. As rebel military activity spreads from remote corners to the heart of the capital, the army is less firmly in control than it was two years ago. Election morning broke with the sound of rocket and helicopter fire trained on rebels in the San Ramon district of the capital the first time in memory an air response has been called to answer weapon fire in the city. Both here and in the provinces "civilian militia" carry out support operations for the guerrillas. "You've got young kids forcibly recruited, with painted faces and guns, and suddenly they (the army) can't tell who is a friend and who is an enemy," offered another reporter who lives here. "They are nervous and trigger-happy." Neither reporter wanted to be named. Tension over journalists in particular sharpened during the election campaign as a result of tactics by the rightist Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA). ARENA accused reporters of "treason-like attitudes" and of "ruining the country's image abroad." At rallies, Roberto D'Aubuisson the party's "Maximum Leader" despite Alfredo Cristiani's candidacy roused crowds by denouncing "los cheles" (foreign reporters) for falsely reporting human rights violations. He has charged that couriers for the rebel army come in and out of the country "disguised as journalists" a serious accusation in this country where death squads operate like vigilantes. The Salvadoran press itself is maturing, becoming bolder and more provocative by including coverage of opponents of the government and military. Unheard of two years ago, Salvadorans today (many of the poorest households have television sets) can tune in human rights workers who might point the finger at the military; hear leftist politicians speak; and follow local reporters behind guerrilla lines a fact which makes the reporters suspect in the eyes of the army as subversive sympathizers. What is most worrisome about the election killings is that they were clearly assassinations. In the past, the military has said attacks on some journalists were cases of mistaken identity. Roberto Navas and Luis Galdamez, Salvadoran photographers for the British agency Reuters, presented their credentials to military officials who stopped their motor scooter on the outskirts of the capital, were cleared, ordered to drive off, and then shot from behind. Roberto died and Luis is gravely ill. A crew from a clearly marked press van was stopped by the military while driving in San Miguel, interrogated, and their credentials reviewed. Later they were flagged down and shot at. Mauricio Pineda de Leon, a sound man for a local TV station, died. Later in the morning, Dutch TV cameraman Cornelio Lagrouw was hit by crossfire during a firefight between rebels and the army in Usulután. When US reporters and others in two press cars waving white flags tried to leave with the cameraman, "we were pursued and shot at repeatedly for 44 minutes"

by fixed wing aircraft and a helicopter with 50 mm machine guns, according to Bill Gentile, a US photographer who has covered the region for ten years for South American publications. For Salvadorans who may not read or know much about what the press is supposed to do, the killings are nonetheless another blow in a war that seems to have no end. Inside Roberto Navas' house in a poor barrio of the capital, his mother received visitors who viewed the dead man's face through a small glass cover on the coffin's lid, then sat quietly in borrowed folding chairs. His young wife wore a T-shirt emblazoned with the word Reuters, and wept holding their two small, dazed children. Roberto's ten-year-old brother draped one arm over the coffin and rested his face against the glass. Indeed, in the kind of low intensity counterinsurgency warfare the United States promotes here as a response to rebellion, news itself becomes a major player. Certainly the US Congress bases its support of US policy partly on news reports. The United States spends \$1 million a day here, much of it to win hearts and minds, and the military is proud of its psychological operations which include heavy doses of "news" not all of it reliable, such as a recent greatly exaggerated report of the death of a famous rebel leader. Rebels respond with their own radio stations broadcasting regular "news programs" vilifying the army. The wild cards are reporters who belong to neither side. Arguably, the fewer reporters present to air El Salvador's dirty laundry, the better for those who would like things to stay the way they are. By the middle of election day, when news came that a third journalist had been killed, some reporters began returning to their hotels, suddenly sensing that the risks had grown too great out on the street.

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