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El Salvador: Report On Upsurge In Violence, Human Rights Violations

by Deborah Tyroler

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* Several human rights monitor organizations have reported that since the victory of the National Republican Alliance (ARENA) in the March 19 elections, violence has steadily increased. For instance, the independent Salvadoran Human Rights Commission has reported that over 800 civilians were killed during the month of April. * Four more ultra-right organizations have emerged since March 19. All have claimed that their function is to ensure that ARENA does not go the way of the Christian Democrat Party and the Party of National Reconciliation. One of the four, a neo-Nazi group, calls itself the National Movement for the Salvation of El Salvador (MNSES). According to an MNSES communique, ARENA has become "a party of the false right." * In early May, civilian "Patriotic Defense Committees" were being organized, described by ARENA officials as an "internal front" against the guerrillas. On May 12, armed forces chief Gen. Eugenio Vides Casanova ordered a stop to the formation of the committees. He said, "There is a danger of the Lebanonization of El Salvador...These groups have good intentions but represent a questioning of democracy. Any civilian force that is organized must be under our command." * On April 21, security forces raided the offices of the United Salvadoran Union Federation (FUSS), the Christian Committee for Displaced Salvadorans (CRIPDES), and the Salvadoran Women's Movement (MSM). The next day newspapers published photographs of the "arsenal" seized by the police and army from the offices: microphones, megaphones, flags, posters, spray cans and paint, wooden sticks and a couple of plastic pails. The Treasury Police described the assortment as "abundant material for fabrication of bombs, FMLN propaganda, marxist literature, and other material used by groups disaffected with the government." The following day a similar raid was carried out at the headquarters of the UNTS (National Union of Salvadoran Workers). About 100 police and soldiers removed sandbags placed in front of the building after four bombing attempts in the past year. Over 80 people were arrested in these raids, the majority women and children; 63 were picked up from the CRIPDES offices. Campesinos visiting the city to obtain medical treatment use the offices as a half-way house. Three of the arrested persons were foreigners who were deported after being detained for 24 hours. One of the deported foreigners was Eve Scarff, from Melbourne, Australia. She had been working in El Salvador for over six months with the International Peace Brigades (BIP), a multinational pacifist organization established in 1981 with volunteers working in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Following Scarff's arrest and deportation, the BIP reacted to Treasury Police allegations that she and the BIP were agents of international communism. In a press release, a BIP spokesperson said the organization had consulted with President Jose Napoleon Duarte in 1987 and obtained his consent to work in El Salvador. All BIP workers were registered with the Ministry of Migration and the Department of Education. Treasury Police spokespersons said the police had received anonymous phone calls reporting increased "suspicious" activity at the five organizations' offices. The Treasury Police are currently setting up a "hotline" to receive information on "suspicious individuals and activities." The Treasury Police denied that detainees had been beaten and tortured. Members of CRIPDES arrested on April 21 and later released, however, showed signs of beatings. Some said they were beaten until they signed blank confessions. Several of their number said they
witnessed CRIPDES director Isabella Reyna Hernandez subjected to "The Hood." This is a form of torture whereby a rubber hood is placed over the head of the victim; a string drawn around the neck causes asphyxiation. As of May 21, eight CRIPDES members remained in police custody, including the director. CRIPDES members who witnessed the raid said the office had been under police observation for some time, and that observation continued afterward. A woman from the US, working with the Brigade for Peace, was quoted by CRIES as saying that US Embassy personnel were seen participating in the surveillance two days after the raid. (Basic data from 05/28/89 report by Regional Coordination for Economic and Social Research of Central America and the Caribbean-CRIES, Managua)

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