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El Salvador: On Persecution Of Trade Unions & Religious

by Deborah Tyroler

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* On Nov. 27, in its first statement since the beginning of the rebel offensive, the National Unity of Salvadoran Workers (UNTS) demanded that the government and the rebels establish an immediate cease-fire, and reiterated its support for a negotiated solution to the conflict. According to military sources, UNTS executive committee member Guillermo Rojas was killed last week in the midst of fighting in the capital city. At the Monday press conference, Rojas said the news about his death was quite startling. UNTS leaders Marco Tulio Lima, Jose Tomas Mazariego and Julio Cesar Portillo said that despite the state of siege, the UNTS has not closed down its activities, and has called on workers to redouble their efforts to organize and maintain "the struggle." Portillo added that the UNTS was established during a state of emergency, and has much experience in working under such conditions. Next, the UNTS leaders demanded that the government cease its witchhunt focused on popular organization leaders, and insisted that the administration guarantee basic freedoms of expression and assembly. In the past two weeks, said the UNTS spokespersons, government security forces have assaulted and ransacked the offices of numerous labor unions and popular organizations, and have imposed virtual full censorship on the national media. Next, the UNTS accused the US of "financing the paramilitary groups and the war against the people." Finally, the labor federation leaders called on the United Nations, the Organization of American States, the European Community and democratic governments throughout the world to use their influence and prestige to persuade the US and Salvadoran governments to abandon their respective commitments to continuing the war in El Salvador. * Trade union organizations and CISPES have reported the following incidents of human rights violations since the rebel offensive was launched on Nov. 11: Jose Tomas Mazariego, ASTTEL (Telecommunications Workers)/UNTS, and Julio Portillo, ANDES/UNTS were accused in a radio broadcast by 1st Brigade Commander Elena Fuentes of leading military actions against the government. The following leaders of popular organizations and trade unions were arrested: Juan Flores, CODYDES (Committee of Unemployed) executive committee/UNTS; Jorge Calderon, CODYDES executive committee; Misael Flores, ASTTEL executive committee; Ricardo Perez, ASTTEL executive committee; Alicia Erazo, STISSS (Hospital Workers Union) executive committee; Jorge Alberto Lara Albano, STISSS executive committee; Jorge Marroquin and Marta Elena Rodriguez, STISSS members; and, Oscar Arnaldo Rojas Aguilar, SOISCES member. Wounded in air force bombings: Oscar Enrique Osorio, ATCEL; Eduardo Martinez, STIMMES; Juan Francisco Portillo, SETIVU; Francisco Iginio Iraheta, SETIVU; Francisco Ramirez, SETIVU; and, Juan Francisco Castaneda Perez, SETIVU, Nov. 14. Killed: Rodolfo Andres Prieto, secretary general of SETA (Water Works Employees), Nov. 12; Miguel Angel Hernandez, ATCEL, Nov. 14; Carlos Humberto Gomez, STISSS, Nov. 14. News media reported the death of Guillermo Rojas, former Secretary General of STISSS, the Hospital Workers Union, but this has not been confirmed). * On Nov. 12, SETA secretary general Rodolfo Andres Prieto was abducted from his home in Soyapango and assassinated. * On Nov. 19, eight leaders and members of the STISSS were abducted from the union office at the Primero de Mayo hospital. * On Nov. 24, the International Red Cross reported that at least 100 union members have been abducted by

government security forces since the rebel offensive began on Nov. 11. * In a Nov. 24 report, Salpress said that Oscar Arnaldo Rojas Aguilar, construction union member and brother of Guillermo Rojas, was abducted Nov. 22 by the Air Force in Soyapango. Salpress also noted the abduction of five University of El Salvador students in Soyapango, who were tortured before being assassinated and their bodies thrown in a ditch. * Last week, the Interamerican Regional Organization of Workers (ORIT), which represents more than 35 million workers in the hemisphere, denounced repression by the Salvadoran military, and called for a cease-fire and resumption of the peace talks. It stated that "the intensive aerial bombings by the military...have increased the number of civilian casualties," and expressed concern over the "repressive actions carried out by government security forces, backed by the state of seige," including the ransacking of the majority of union and popular organization offices which has "forced their leaders to go underground." The ORIT specifically denounced the campaign of threats aired on government controlled television and radio, against labor leaders and compared it to the campaign against the Jesuit priest Ignacio Ellacuria before he was assassinated Nov. 16. It said "death squads controlled and directed by the military in service of the government" were responsible for the assassination of the Jesuits and the bombing of the FENASTRAS office in which 10 people were massacred. The ORIT called on the Salvadoran government to investigate these crimes and punish those responsible, and to protect the civilian population in areas of combat. It also called for a truce to allow the evacuation of the wounded and for a renewal of the dialogue between both parties in conflict. * A report by the Central America Resource Center (Minneapolis, Minn.) dated 11/27/89 is summarized below, drawn from reports by persons residing in El Salvador, and affected organizations. Nov. 13: In Soyapango, soldiers attempted to enter the Maria Madre de los Pobres parish grounds, where some 40 homeless Salvadorans had taken refuge. Soldiers shot at the feet of church workers when the latter refused to permit entry. Nov. 14: In Soyapango, Catholic priest Father Jim Barnett of the Ciudad Credisa parish, and Rev. Bill Dexheimer, a Lutheran minister, received a telephoned death threat. The death threat was made in English by an individual who spoke without an accent. Both religious have left the country. Soldiers demanded that Maria Madre de Los Pobres church in Soyapango be evacuated and told church workers that the area would be bombed. At the time between 150 and 200 refugees were inside the parish facilities, including six wounded persons. Later National Police in camouflage uniforms set up a command post on the grounds. When the parish priest attempted to explain that the grounds are property of the archdiocese, a soldier shot at his feet. Archdiocesan workers reported that Immaculate Conception parish facilities in Cuzcatancingo had been seriously damaged by machinegun fire. Nov. 15: In San Salvador, soldiers searched the Catholic Relief Services office. Catholic priest Father Richard Howard and a Salvadoran church worker en route to deliver supplies from the archdiocese to the Cristo Salvador parish in Zacamil were detained by soldiers. After the soldiers confiscated food and medicine, the three were released. Uniformed soldiers searched the San Roque parish facilities. A young man on the premises was beaten, and books from the priest's office were confiscated. The soldiers asserted, "We're going to get rid of the foreigners." Uniformed soldiers entered the Maria Madre de Los Pobres parish grounds in Soyapango, and ordered over 300 refugees and church workers to leave the premises. Soldiers tossed a grenade onto the roof of the parish clinic, injuring two people and damaging the roof and windows. The army forced the church to close. Uniformed soldiers searched the home of a lay worker of the Baptist Association of El Salvador (ABES). Nov. 16: The Catholic school, Sagrado Familia, which is a church-designated refugee center in San Salvador, was searched for 45 minutes by military troops. A nun at the Sagrado Corazon school, a church refugee center sheltering 400 displaced persons, received a telephone call telling her to get her bags ready because she would

have to leave. The caller added, "Ortega is waiting for you." The home of Marina Alcantara de Serrano, a deacon of the Emmanuel Baptist church in San Jacinto, was searched. Her husband is a trade union member, and has been imprisoned since September this year. Nov. 17: The Sagrada Familia refuge was searched again by 20 armed, uniformed soldiers who threatened to shoot the door down if nuns on the premises refused to permit them entry. The offices of the Emmanuel Baptist Church were searched for four hours by soldiers who arrived with a truck and tank. Nov. 18: Soldiers arrived at Sagrado Corazon church refuge, but nuns refused them entry. In Ilopango, soldiers surrounded the church of the parish headed by Fr. Fabian Amaya. Soldiers surrounded the Colegio Emiliani. The San Roque refuge was searched by army soldiers for four hours. Soldiers checked the ID cards of all males among the 50 refugees present, and questioned the refugees as to the whereabouts of the parish priest. The refugees left the area, and the center was closed. Five Salvadorans were captured at a clinic connected to the San Francisco parish in Mejicanos by soldiers who asserted that the clinic was for "guerrillas." * On Nov. 28, Mario Aguinada Carranza, secretary general of the National Democratic Union (UDN) party, denounced the arrest of party members Rafael Argueta and Antonio Valle. Party spokespersons said 1st Infantry Brigade troops raided the main UDN offices in San Salvador on Tuesday morning. * At a news conference in New York on Nov. 29, Josephine Beecher, 37, of Lopez Island, Wash., said that she was blindfolded, tortured and interrogated in Treasury Police headquarters in San Salvador. Beecher said she was arrested last week when National Guard troops raided a refugee sanctuary in St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church in San Salvador where she worked. Beecher and six other foreigners were arrested and released within a day. At least 14 Salvadoran church workers remain in custody, according to church officials. Beecher returned to the US on the evening of Nov. 28. According to Beecher, interrogators accused her of being "a delinquent terrorist" and "of having planned the current offensive..." "I was blindfolded, handcuffed, hit in the head and threatened...They said they were going to set the electric shock up and said, 'Let's turn on the electricity.' They ran some object...across my throat and said, 'This is what's going to happen to you.'" Beecher said the interrogators also placed a rubber hood filled with talcum powder over her head to force her to answer questions. Meanwhile, US Vice Consul David Ramos watched as policemen removed her watch and glasses and led her away for questioning. "The entire time I was being interrogated," she said, "the US consular official was on the premises, having coffee with the colonel in charge." In order to be released, Beecher said, she was told she had to sign papers that included a phrase saying she had not been mistreated psychologically or physically. After signing the form and crossing out that clause, she said, Ramos ordered that another form be typed with the clause intact and told her to sign it. When Beecher complained of her treatment to consular officials, she said, "I was told that what I had received was normal treatment for a prisoner of war and that they didn't see any problem with that." Before Beecher spoke, Presiding Bishop Edmond L. Browning of the Episcopal Church released a statement signed by the heads of nine churches representing 13 million US citizens. The statement asserted "outrage over the deliberate and calculated campaign by government forces in El Salvador to intimidate and harass the churches in that country." Since the rebel offensive began on Nov. 11, Salvadoran troops and police have raided Roman Catholic, Baptist and Lutheran church offices. Beecher said that Jennifer Casolo and other religious worker recently received telephoned death threats. She added that as many as 40 foreign church workers have been forced to leave the country. * At the United Nations on Nov. 30, Catholic priest Jim Barnett of the Dominican order spoke with reporters on his recent experiences in San Salvador. He described attempts on Nov. 14 to speak with the US Ambassador in El Salvador, William Walker, to inform him of air force bombings in the Soyapango neighborhood of San Salvador where his parish is located. Barnett has worked

in El Salvador for the past four years. The priest said he did not succeed in his attempt to speak with the ambassador. Instead, he was held up by a secretary who insisted on first obtaining a series of detailed information on his intentions and identity. Next, Barnett said that four hours later when he returned to his parish in Soyapango, he received an anonymous death threat "made by someone whose native language was American English." After receiving advice from the San Salvador archdiocese that he should not take death threats lightly, Barnett said he decided to travel to Washington. The priest said he did not know of the "US role" in the systematic aggression against Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopalian, and Mennonite groups who work in El Salvador. Barnett rejected the Salvadoran government's claims that church workers are linked to the rebels: "We work with the poor who are 80% of the population, that is our work." In reference to church worker Jennifer Casolo, accused by the Salvadoran military of storing weapons for the rebels, the priest said that he knew her and her work personally. He added, "I do not believe the charges made against her, and it wouldn't be the first time" a person such as Casolo had been framed. Barnett said he would return to his work in San Salvador as soon as his order permits. (Basic data from Salpress, 11/24/89; 11/25/89 report by CISPES; Notimex, 11/27/89, 11/30/89; 11/27/89 report by the Central America Resource Center (Minneapolis, Minn.); Radio Venceremos, 11/28/89; Washington Post, 11/30/89)

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