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El Salvador: Persecution Drives Humanitarian Organizations Underground Or Into Exile, Including United Nations

by Deborah Tyroler

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During the state of emergency imposed after the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) launched a major offensive on Nov. 11, hundreds of people have been detained, including at least two dozen foreigners who work with churches or humanitarian groups. Most non-Salvadorans have been deported, although a few remain jailed facing charges. (See article below on Casolo.) Foreigners who work with the poor are called "internationalists," and they are a favorite target of the right. A flier signed "Salvadoran air force," considered the most reactionary branch of the armed forces, was found strewn on city streets over the weekend. It said, "With God, reason and might, we shall conquer...Salvadoran patriot: You have every right to defend your life and your property. If in order to do this you have to kill FMLN terrorists and their internationalist allies, do it." On Dec. 1, President Alfredo Cristiani referred to the FMLN as a "minority joined by internationalists who come here to murder Salvadorans." Summarized below are selected developments on persecution of humanitarian and religious groups. (See also article on Church statements below, and 12/01/89, 11/29/89 issues of CAU.) Nov. 22: In Los Angeles, Brenda Hubbard and Eugene Terril told reporters that after being arrested in San Salvador, they were subjected to "psychological pressures." The two were detained Nov. 15 during a military raid of the Committee of Mothers and Relatives of Political Prisoners (COMADRES) office, and released two days later. Hubbard, a 41-year-old teacher who worked with COMADRES, said the soldiers burst into the office to "search for weapons." Terril, who was visiting San Salvador at the time, said, "They accused us of being terrorists, of supporting the guerrillas, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN)." Sonia Baires, representative of El Rescate, said Hubbard and Terril were threatened with death. El Rescate is a Los Angeles-based El Salvador solidarity group. In its Nov. 21 edition, the Los Angeles Times reported that the US Embassy in San Salvador had not received complaints from US citizens about treatment at the hands of the Salvadoran authorities. Hubbard, however, said she complained to Nicholas Ricuitti, an embassy official. Ricuitti told the Times that she had never told him what had happened to her. Dec. 1: Chief UN representative in San Salvador, Gonzalo Castillo Perez, said a UN mission of about 30 members was evacuated "for lack of guarantees" and that the office will be transferred to Guatemala. The mission was responsible for carrying out several programs, including those of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, UNICEF and UNDP. The UN offices in the Escalon neighborhood were damaged Nov. 29 in the midst of fighting between rebels and the army. Employees inside the building were evacuated by the Green Cross. Government troops entered the office later, said Castillo Perez. When UN personnel returned to the office on Nov. 30, said Castillo Perez, the front of the building was pocked with bullet holes, and equipment and furniture inside appeared to have been deliberately smashed. The UN employees found scrawled on the walls: "UN equals FMLN equals Traitors." About 60 UN employees and dependents had been evacuated from El Salvador shortly after the rebels launched their offensive on Nov. 11. [On Dec. 4, Notimex reported that Castillo Perez received a telephone call from President Alfredo Cristiani on Saturday apologizing for the damage to the

UN offices, which he described as deplorable. The Salvadoran government is to send a high-level mission to Guatemala to request that the UN return as soon as possible to resume its work in El Salvador.] In Managua, Jose Carlos Fernandez, superior of the Catholic Dominican Order, said that police arrested a Spanish priest, Carlos Diez Rojo, a US aid worker, and three Salvadorans in a San Salvador church on Thursday night. Dec. 2: According to the Central American Committee on Human Rights (CODEHUCA), 11 members of the Episcopalian Church will be tried by a military tribunal on charges they took part in an attack against the Salvadoran armed forces headquarters. Among the church members awaiting trial were Luis Serrano Lorenti, head the Episcopalian Church of El Salvador, and his wife both from Spain as well as nine members of their congregation. The Serrano couple was arrested Nov. 19 at their home and the rest were taken into custody Nov. 20 at the Episcopalian San Juan Evangelista church, in downtown San Salvador. The human rights group said two Spanish teachers had been arrested Nov. 20 at the same church, where a shelter for war refugees had been set up when the rebel offensive began. The teachers were released the same day, CODEHUCA said. Americas Watch said nine (rather than 11) Salvadorans were transferred to prison to await trial after the charges were filed Friday. The Salvadorans, said Americas Watch, are accused of allowing rebels to hide trucks loaded with homemade mortars at their church the night before an Oct. 30 attack on the Defense Ministry. Mortar shells were fired from two trucks, killing a gas station attendant working near the ministry compound and wounding 15 people. Unidentified sources at Serrano's church told AP that armed guerrillas forced their way into the church compound on Oct. 29 and spent the night there. The sources said none of the church members was a participant in the mortar attack. Dec. 3: Reuters reported that the Catholic Church is seeking a meeting with senior military officials over a wave of repression against religious. Auxiliary Archbishop of San Salvador Gregorio Rosa Chavez said, "We want to ask for an audience with the chiefs of staff to present a series of very concrete cases and discuss them in depth. Because many abuses are being committed not only against Catholic church personnel but also against many others concerned about reaching the humblest and poorest." Rosa Chavez said a wave of persecution against the church was exacerbated by an "antiterrorist law climate." On Nov. 23, the National Assembly passed the framework of a series of legal reforms which give the government virtually unlimited power to crush political dissent. Lutheran Bishop Medardo Gomez fled El Salvador for the US last week after receiving death threats, according to Reuters. Dec. 4: Eileen Rosin, the sole representative in El Salvador of the Los Angeles-based Medical Aid for El Salvador, left the country. Her office was ransacked by soldiers on Saturday. For eight years, Medical Aid has distributed money for prosthetic devices, delivered donated medicines to hospitals and sent dozens of children to the US for operations beyond the technical means of Salvadoran hospitals. Rosin, 35, had worked in El Salvador for two years and left for Los Angeles. In an interview with AP at the Mariona prison, the Rev. Serrano said, "We are in the catacombs. There is no prospect for above-ground humanitarian work with the poor in the short- or medium-term." His church has been involved for years in social, medical and educational work with displaced people and refugees. US Secretary of State James Baker has said the crackdown by the government and armed forces was "absolutely appropriate." A US religious worker, Scott Wright of San Antonio, Texas, was released on condition he leave the country after spending the weekend in jail. He was accused of being involved with the guerrillas, but no charges were filed. Scott was the US aid worker arrested in a Roman Catholic church in the capital on Thursday night. (Basic data from Notimex, 11/22/89, 12/04/89; Reuters, 12/03/89; AP, 12/01/89, 12/04/89; AFP, 12/01/89, 12/02/89)

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