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Church Hierarchy Statements On Human Rights Violations, Conditions In El Salvador

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Dec. 3 in a sermon, auxiliary bishop of San Salvador, Gregorio Rosa Chavez, said that the Church will present the army with "a list of definite cases" of abuse committed in recent weeks against Catholics, Lutherans and Episcopalians under the cover of fighting rebels, and a detailed report on the Nov. 16 murder of six Jesuit priests and two women. He said the 38-page report, prepared by the archbishop's legal protection office, Tutela Legal, included the church's view on this "detestable crime." Rosa Chavez said that in the "atmosphere of antiterrorist law" that blankets El Salvador "many abuses are committed not only against Catholic Church personnel, but against many people who are trying to help the most humble and poor." In response to the "unfounded" accusations and other abuses against various groups, including the Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Episcopalian churches, the Salvadoran archbishop wants to analyze the incidents with top members of the armed forces, he said. "First we are going to present the definite cases to the chiefs of staff and then we will release them to the press," said Rosa Chavez, noting "we want to use this method" to determine whether the incidents were caused by the nervousness and tensions of the past weeks or whether they constituted a "systematic persecution." "We understand that often (the church's mission) is misunderstood, but it has to be done because the poorest people need to feel God's care through the church's priests and workers," he said. The auxiliary bishop said the church counted 160 victims of political violence in El Salvador during the past week, including the assassination of the former president of the Supreme Court, Francisco Jose Guerrero, and the shooting death of Eloy Guevara Paiz, an Agence France-Presse photographer. Catholic bishops from the Central American region attended an annual conference on Nov. 27-30 in Costa Rica. A message by the bishops released on Sunday in San Salvador by auxiliary bishop Rosa Chavez said that "justice" is an "indispensable condition" toward attaining peace in Central America. The bishops denounced the use of civilians as shields by the Salvadoran rebels, and the intense bombings of heavily populated areas by the Salvadoran military. The communique criticized the Salvadoran government's use of the media to "exacerbate tensions and increase hatred among brothers," and condemned the actions of paramilitary groups, also known as death squads. Next, the bishops asserted that the principal elements obstructing peace in the region are the persistence of serious social problems, the "criminal obstinacy" seen in preferences for military solutions, and the "failure of peace efforts through dialogue." In its Dec. 4 issue, the New York Times published a feature and interview with internationally known theologian, Jesuit priest Jon Sobrino. On Nov. 17 in Bangkok, Thailand, Sobrino was giving a lecture about Jesus to Asians interested in Latin American liberation theology. In San Salvador, where the date was still Nov. 16, armed men were entering the university dormitory that Fr. Sobrino usually shared with fellow Jesuits. Six priests and two women were tortured and killed. Born in Spain, Sobrino came to El Salvador in 1957 as a young seminarian. He left to study at St. Louis University in the US from 1960 to 1965, and from 1966 to 1973 in Frankfurt, where he was ordained. A naturalized citizen of El Salvador, he teaches theology and philosophy at Jose Simeon Canas University in San Salvador. "I want to go back to El Salvador," he said, although he realizes that this may be impossible under present conditions. Sobrino would likely have been

murdered as well on Nov. 16 had he not been in Thailand. The Jesuit priest is quite familiar with violent death, beginning with the death of another friend, Rev. Rutilio Grande, in 1977. The entire Jesuit community has received death threats. A previous residence where Sobrino lived was strafed with machine gun fire in 1980; two bombs were found there that year. Bombs have exploded on the university campus more than a dozen times since the civil war began. In 1981, after the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador and the killings of four US churchwomen, Sobrino wrote of "an endless procession of priests, seminarians, students, campesinos, teachers, workers, professionals and intellectuals murdered for the faith." Sobrino was interviewed by telephone from Santa Clara University in California, where he is now staying. "We got used to it...It might sound strange but we did. "Our thinking was simple. El Salvador is a country full of injustice and poverty, and anyone, whether through the churches or human rights organizations, who has taken sides with these poor people, who has tried to tell the truth about the country and the causes of so much poverty, that person has to take into account a certain amount of risk, of losing your life. "But personally this time for me has been a lot different. I have lived and worked with [the six Jesuits] for many years. I loved them. I felt terrible and I had a feeling of great loss." Sobrino continued: "I felt everything anger, indignation, sorrow, everything together. I felt indignation because if these things happen to Jesuits, well-known people...if these people can be killed so easily, then of course you understand what happens to the peasants and those without defense. "And what is the reaction? People say let's make an investigation. I hope there is an investigation, but it sounds cynical. What does an investigation mean? After years, not even the case of Archbishop Romero has been explained." Sobrino described the murders of his six Jesuit colleagues "the response of the ultra-right right" to the uprising of the rebels in San Salvador. But, he quickly added that on Oct. 31, 10 days before the rebel offensive began, 10 leaders of the Salvadoran labor movement were killed by a bomb and 30 were wounded. He said, "The ultimate explanation is that telling the truth about El Salvador is dangerous. There are people who don't want to hear the truth...And the truth is not just politics. Often El Salvador is analyzed only in political terms, whether the government is freely elected or violates human rights, whether the rebels are marxists. "That doesn't lead us to the most important truth of the country. With or without free elections, poverty and injustice are still the main issues." According to Sobrino, what was especially "paradoxical about the killing of my brother Jesuits "was that everyone knows, and President Cristiani knows, that they were working for dialogue." Cristiani recently conferred several times with Rev. Ignacio Ellacuria, the university rector, who was one of the priests murdered on Nov. 16. Sobrino said Cristiani had also been invited to the university in September, when an honorary degree was given to Costa Rican President Oscar Arias. Noting that Cristiani had invited Ellacuria to join a team investigating the labor leaders' deaths, Sobrino said: "We wanted to support dialogue and peace. We were against the war. But we have been considered communists, marxists, supporters of the rebels, all that type of thing." Regarding the US, Sobrino said he felt "impotence and powerlessness." He added that war in El Salvador will end only by negotiations, and Washington has the leverage to bring the two sides together. On Dec. 5 at the 15th congress of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) in Miami, Archbishop of San Salvador Arturo Rivera y Damas told a group of scholars that El Salvador can be described as a house on fire. The Church's mission in such a situation is first, to rescue children and women from the fire. The archbishop said since the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) took power in June, economic and civil rights conditions have deteriorated. The government, he said, is responsible for the progressive impoverishment of the country. According to Rivera y Damas, the rational mode of resolving conflicts is negotiations, and this is the position of the Church. Meanwhile, the Church cannot be supportive of either side to the conflict, nor

can its mission be forced into "the catacombs," or underground. Rivera y Damas confirmed prior statements by the Church on the armed forces' responsibility for the Nov. 16 torture and killing of six Jesuit priests and two women on the grounds of the Jose Simeon Canas Central American University. In the archbishop's view, the guerrillas' offensive launched Nov. 11 was the result of mistaken perceptions. Given the country's economic deterioration and the growing corruption and deepening of individual privileges, said Rivera y Damas, the rebels believed conditions were ripe for a popular insurrection. Rivera y Damas called for an end to all weapons shipments to Central America, and particularly to El Salvador. He also called on industrialized nations to "review" their economic policies which have the effect of continuously impoverishing Central America. The archbishop noted that the Church will continue working with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to repatriate Salvadorans who wish to return home. About 20% of the population, or one million Salvadorans, have fled the country since 1981. (Basic data from Notimex, 12/03/89, 12/05/89; AFP, 12/03/89; New York Times, 12/04/89)

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