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## El Salvador: Americas Watch Report

by Deborah Tyroler

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On March 23, Americas Watch released "A Year of Reckoning: El Salvador a Decade After the Assassination of Archbishop Romero" in connection with 10th anniversary March 24 of the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero. The report documents the current human rights situation in El Salvador and reviews developments throughout the decade. Americas Watch states that recent events, highlighted by the assassination of six Jesuit priests and their household staff, demonstrate that human rights conditions in the wake of the guerrilla offensive in November deteriorated to their worst levels since the early 1980s and illustrate the failure of US human rights policy in El Salvador throughout the decade. In the report, Americas Watch sets forth in detail a wide range of violations which reflect a deterioration in the overall human rights situation in El Salvador in the past year. Some of the concerns expressed in the report follow: \* Despite limited progress in the prosecution of the Jesuit case, there is a real danger that the true authors of the crime may not have been identified, and that the highest ranking officer implicated so far will not be convicted or punished. [Salvadoran President Alfredo Cristiani was quoted in the Washington Post as saying that he is "not confident" Col. Guillermo Alfredo Benavides will be convicted. "I'd be sad if he is acquitted because I think he is guilty based on the investigation." ] Salvadoran President Alfredo Cristiani was quoted in the Washington Post as saying that he is "not confident" Col. Guillermo Alfredo Benavides will be convicted. "I'd be sad if he is acquitted because I think he is guilty based on the investigation," said Cristiani.] \* To date President Cristiani has failed to mention, let alone investigate, several atrocities apart from the Jesuit case committed by the armed forces in recent months. \* In 1989, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) engaged in a series of assassinations of prominent civilian government officials and conservative figures. \* Throughout 1989 the FMLN continued to use catapult bombs in urban areas, resulting in numerous civilian casualties. \* A series of searches, arrests, threats and attacks by government forces in the wake of the November offensive has effectively slammed shut previously existing political space. In the months preceding President Cristiani's inauguration in June 1989, and increasingly thereafter, the Salvadoran government has engaged in widespread use of torture in the interrogation of detainees. \* In the past 18 months death squads escalated the public nature of their threats and attacks, and several new paramilitary organizations emerged. Americas Watch states that US officials, today as in the early 1980s, put forth three principal claims in support of their contention that US military assistance to El Salvador is essential in promoting human rights and the rule of law: (1) Human rights abuses by the Salvadoran government and military have progressively declined. While the numbers of targeted killings in recent years do not approach the carnage of the early 1980s, the trend has not been toward steady improvement. Moreover, declining numbers of political murders would not by itself evidence greater respect for human rights within the armed forces, or enhanced freedom to express political dissent. The level of violence is still such that it is dangerous to express certain views or maintain certain associations. (2) To the extent they persist, human rights abuses are not the responsibility of the elected civilian government of El Salvador. US officials have consistently assigned responsibility for human rights violations to runaway "death squads" and "vigilante" elements who operate without the approval of the authorities. At the same time, the US government has insisted that the civilian leaders of El Salvador do maintain control over the reins of power. The

two contentions are contradictory. The sheer number of violations committed by the Salvadoran security forces over the past year belies the notion that a few rogue bands are responsible for all the terror. In all likelihood, President Cristiani does not exercise substantial control over the armed forces. Either the president is in control of the military apparatus, in which case he is responsible for its abuses, or he is not, in which case civilian government in El Salvador is a misnomer. The notion that the great majority of political crimes in El Salvador are committed by unauthorized bands of outlaws would be more plausible if those responsible were regularly identified and punished. In reality, the great majority of killings of noncombatants have never been investigated. Moreover, responsibility for virtually all war-related crimes, including death squad and political killings committed prior to October 22, 1987, was absolved by a general amnesty. Archbishop Romero's assassination was the only exception. (3) US military training and assistance offer the most effective means of eliminating remaining abuses by inculcating in the Salvadoran armed forces greater respect for human rights. US officials consistently underline how little basic attitudes within the Salvadoran military have changed when they suggest that a withdrawal of military aid will lead to increased abuses on the part of unrestrained military forces. How sincere can the Salvadoran military's commitment to human rights be, if, after 10 years, it is still being effectively held in place by the yoke of US dollars? [Basic data from 03/23/90 report, Americas Watch (Washington, DC); Notimex, 03/22/90; Washington Post, 03/24/90]

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