EL SALVADOR Watch

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U.S. Ratchets up Intervention as Elections Approach in El Salvador, CISPES Gears up to Respond

Anti-terrorism law, police repression, electoral manipulation part of U.S. attack on Salvadoran democracy

by Cameron Herrington, Seattle CISPES

The past two years in El Salvador have been marked by increased resistance and organizing in the face of the failed economic and social policies of the right-wing ARENA party and its principal backer, the Bush Administration. In its solidarity work with social organizations and progressive political forces in El Salvador, CISPES has witnessed the Salvadoran and U.S. governments' repressive response to this growth in opposition political activity, and we have provided political and material support to those who are being targeted and repressed.

In the shadow of the 2006 implementation of CAFTA – the Central American Free Trade Agreement – the U.S. State Department began training El Salvador's police at the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA), located just outside of San Salvador. El Salvador's National Civilian Police (PNC) has, in the intervening two years, become an increasingly repressive and politicized institution. Armed with the "Special Law Against Acts of Terrorism," the PNC has been regularly used to silence dissent and violently confront protesters. Politically motivated crimes – including the assassinations of social, religious and opposition political leaders – routinely go uninvestigated.

Presidents Bush and Saca have had close ties since US intervention helped Saca win the presidency in 2004

As monumental elections approach in El Salvador, scheduled for January and March of 2009, we expect that the repressive behavior of the Salvadoran government will only increase. We also expect the United States to intervene in the elections on behalf of ARENA, as has happened in the past. In the face of these threats, CISPES is preparing to confront U.S. intervention and the repressive ARENA government that this intervention is meant to support. *continued on pg 3*

Déjà vu All Over Again: CISPES Receives Threatening Communication from U.S. Department of Justice

by Burke Stansbury, CISPES Executive Director

You may have seen or heard a news report recently titled "Grassroots Organization Accused of Being Foreign "Agent" of Salvadoran Leftists" and wondered if the year were actually 1986. Back then, CISPES was illegally targeted by the largest FBI Internal Security investigation of the Reagan era, and our handling of that particular incursion by the FBI was a major triumph of the Central American solidarity movement. So the U.S. government would never dare return to the tactics used during the infamous FBI infiltration of CISPES, right? Wrong!

In January of 2008, we received a letter from the Department of Justice that may have well been written in the 80s, except that it referred to the Farabundo Marti Front for National Liberation, or FMLN, as a political party and not a guerrilla army. The letter cites the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, and questions our organization's relationship with the leftist FMLN party. The letter refers to the CISPES website and an article published in the Washington Post following the December 2007 visit of the FMLN's presidential candidate Mauricio Funes. It states that, "it has come to our attention… that the FMLN, and/or possibly its candidate for El Salvador's 2009 presidential election, Mauricio Funes, hired your organization for the purposes of conducting a public relations media campaign to include political fundraising…"

Of course, CISPES has never had a contractual agreement with the FMLN or Funes, nor have we taken orders from the party to do publicity work in the U.S. Rather, we have a solidarity relationship based on shared political values that goes back to the struggle for democracy and economic justice that the people of El Salvador fought against a brutal U.S.-backed military regime in the 1980s. The Department of Justice gave no other evidence to back up its claim, and the aforementioned *continued on pg 5*

A Solidarity Triumph in Suchitoto!

The latest chapter in El Salvador's repressive history was written on July 2 in the town of Suchitoto, where hundreds of peaceful protesters were violently attacked. 14 community and social movement leaders were arrested, and 13 charged under the controversial Special Law Against Acts of Terrorism, which was passed in 2006 by the right-wing bloc in the Legislative Assembly.

The demonstration was a peaceful action coordinated by various women's, rural, and social organizations to protest the central government's inauguration of its Water Decentralization Plan, which, according to the organizations present, is a concrete step towards the privatization of water in El Salvador. Social organizations such as the Public Water Workers' Union, SETA, believes that the central government is under great pressure from international financial institutions such as the Interamerican Development Bank to privatize the national water management and distribution entity.

"Women demand that the anti-terrorism law be overturned!" Although the Suchitoto 13 were freed of all charges, the anti-terrorism law remains on the books in El Salvador (photo Colatino)

Shortly after the demonstration began, the president of El Salvador gave orders for both anti-riot police and military officers to be sent to Suchitoto to repress the demonstration, violating the people's constitutional right to express dissent, organize and mobilize in response to an issue that affects their economic and social well being.

The 14 people arrested were psychologically and physically abused by agents of the specialized national police units. One person was so terribly beaten that he was released and all charges were dropped as he was in need of serious medical attention. All of these facts were denounced nationally and internationally, yet nobody has been held responsible.

Despite national pressure, backed by international support against these repressive acts, President Saca persisted in setting an example of these 13 political prisoners to thwart any further organizing and mobilizing to defend water in El Salvador. However, as local organizations united in protest and solidarity from all parts of the world began to pour in, Saca's defense of his Anti-Terrorism Law began to crumble. Even some judges within the court system publicly criticized the government's repressive acts and the unconstitutionality of the law itself.

Seven months after the initial arrests took place, on February 19, all 13 political activists arrested in Suchitoto were set free, and all charges against them were dismissed. According to many social movement leaders, the fact that the Anti-Terrorist Law was not applied to the political prisoners represents the strength the Salvadoran social movement has in organizing and defending its rights. The leadership of the leftist FMLN party also attributes this victory to the overwhelming international support the Suchitoto prisoners and their families received during the entire process.

CISPES, along with other solidarity organizations, held a series of actions in response to the case, including two national "weeks of action." U.S. organizations convinced more than 40 members of Congress to sign a letter to President Saca last July questioning the application of the anti-terrorism law in the case of the non-violent Suchitoto protestors. CISPES also solicited letters from Representatives like Jim McGovern (MA) and Jim McDermott (WA), who sent personal pleas to the Salvadoran government right before the February court date. These letters reiterated the Representatives' concern for the state of human rights in El Salvador and urged President Saca to respect basic civil liberties, including the freedom of political expression.

From the beginning of the case, CISPES has maintained 4 demands: drop unjust charges, overturn the anti-terrorism law, stop water privatization, and close the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) – a police school run by the U.S. State Department and located in El Salvador. We congratulate our allies on their victory while continuing the struggle against US-sponsored repression and the ILEA! ■

For more information go to www.cispes.org

INTERVENTION *cont. from pg. 1*

Invoking terror to close the door on democratic change

On February 8, after months of relentless international and domestic pressure, charges of "acts of terrorism" were dismissed for 13 activists and community leaders who had been arrested at a demonstration against a government water privatization scheme last summer in the town of Suchitoto (see related article on pg. 2). Though this case is far from an isolated incidence of overzealous law enforcement, the violent, illegal repression of the Suchitoto protestors and subsequent terrorism charges are widely viewed as the worst human rights abuses since the end of the civil war in 1992.

Continuing a decades-long pattern, the role of the United States in supporting this most recent attack on Salvadoran democracy is unambiguous:

- The law that gave rise to the terrorism charges, 2006's "Special Law Against Acts of Terrorism," is modeled on the USA PATRIOT ACT and was heralded by then U.S. Ambassador Barclay, who celebrated El Salvador's ascension to the status of "partner in the war on terror. "
- El Salvador's increasingly corrupt and repressive National Civilian Police (PNC) is lauded by the U.S. State Department as an outstanding institution that should serve as an example for all of Latin America .
- Members of the PNC receive special counter-terrorism training at the U.S.-run ILEA in San Salvador.
- The Salvadoran military, which now routinely violates a fundamental principal of the 1992 Peace Accords by participating in domestic law enforcement – and took part in the Suchitoto repression – continues to be trained at the U.S. Army's Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC, formerly the School of the Americas) at Ft. Benning, Georgia.

Unfortunately, the Suchitoto case is far from unique in its invocation of the U.S.-led "war on terror" for the purpose of suppressing legitimate democratic participation. Despite the Bush administration's rhetoric about promoting democracy, real world evidence demonstrates that the "war on terror" has gone to considerable lengths to stop freedom and democracy dead in its tracks. While this is clearly the case in the U.S. – with warrantless wiretapping, spying on peace activists, and the PATRIOT ACT representing dangerous incursions on basic democratic rights – it is perhaps even more blatant in oft-overlooked corners of the world. In El Salvador, 16 years after the end of the U.S.-sponsored civil war, a once-hopeful democratic opening has been perilously narrowed, in part by the logic of the "war on terror."

Electoral intervention

In addition to its support for the Salvadoran government's crackdown on political dissent, it seems certain, based on past experience, that the U.S. government will directly intervene in El Salvador's 2009 elections. In fact, Salvadoran President Tony Saca has already publicly called for such intervention. Furthermore, it is probable that this intervention will exploit El Salvador's economic dependence upon immigrants living the United States as part of the right-wing ARENA party's fear-based campaign.

It is estimated that over a quarter of El Salvador's families directly rely upon relatives in the United States to provide for their basic needs through remittances. In reality, the entire economy would collapse without the 2-3 billion dollars that immigrants send back to El Salvador every year. As a result, any threats to this source of survival, no matter how dubious, carry a lot of weight in Salvadoran electoral politics.

The majority of Salvadorans living in *continued on pg 5*

Join CISPES' Fact-Finding Delegation to El Salvador! June 20-29, 2008

With presidential elections scheduled for March 2009, El Salvador is poised to be next in line as part of Latin America's trend of electing left-leaning governments. CISPES has a 28-year old solidarity relationship with El Salvador's social movement, and our allies have asked us to again be present in El Salvador with a delegation during the early stages of the electoral process.

To support the Salvadoran people in their struggle to ensure free, fair, and transparent elections, this delegation will produce a report about recent changes to the electoral code, preliminary signs of U.S. intervention, political repression, and other conditions that exist prior the presidential, municipal, and legislative elections of 2009. A particular focus will be the behavior of El Salvador's police force, which is trained at the U.S.-run ILEA. This delegation will be an integral component of CISPES' work to stop U.S. intervention in El Salvador's elections.

We invite you to join the delegation to witness firsthand the social movement force that is behind El Salvador's exciting electoral process, while helping to uncover the economic, political, and human right situations being confronting during this electoral season.

CISPES delegates meet with Salvadoran Human Rights Ombudswoman during a delegation in 2007

For more information: email elizabeth@cispes.org, call (202) 521 2510, or visit our website www.cispes.org

Support REAL democracy! Join the 2008 CISPES delegation!

No Resolution in Case of Murdered Mayor

Impunity in politically motivated assassination sets dark precedent as electoral season begins

On the morning of January 9th, leaders from the rural community of Las Casitas in the municipality of Alegría, Usulután, waited for the arrival of their mayor and his staff to discuss the construction of a soccer field in their community. But Moises Funes, the 31-year-old mayor from the FMLN party, never arrived.

Just before reaching the community, Funes was waved down by a man in a truck. Upon stopping his car, Funes and his companion, municipal employee Zulma Rivera, 22, were shot and killed. According to the testimony of a single witness, the assassin then escaped in his vehicle through the coffee fields. He has yet to be identified.

In the following days, the atmosphere in this small town was one of mourning and sadness. Over 5,000 people attended Funes' funeral. A mayor who had been truly loved was now lost forever.

The district attorney's office began an investigation, announcing that it could not say whether the motive was political or personal, but that it would investigate the crime as it would any other. In El Salvador, where between 80% and 85% of crimes remain unresolved, these words didn't breed optimism. Indeed, the district attorney's office has yet to detain any suspects, and so far the case has remained in impunity.

Sigfrido Reyes, FMLN Senator and Chief of Communications explained that "while those responsible remain free, the people are in fear because there exists a threat that continues to be relevant: the assassins are free and they can therefore think about assassinating anybody."

This fear materialized on February 3rd, when Lorenzo Campos, the only witness to the double-assassination, was gravely injured by gunshot. Campos works as a driver, and upon arriving to pick up a female client who had arranged a ride by telephone, was shot twice in the throat and once in the neck, leaving him badly wounded. On January 9, Campos was the first person at the scene of Funes' murder and tried to rescue the mayor, bringing him to the hospital in his own vehicle.

Moises Funes and Alegría

Wilber Moises Funes was killed in Janaury 2008

When Funes won the municipal election in March 2006, unseating Carlos Antonio Luna of the right-wing ARENA party, who had been in office for 12 years, it quickly became clear that not everybody thought the change was for the best. Funes' mother, María Auxiliadora Ramírez, recalls that ARENA party loyalists came to the family's house to throw rocks when the results were announced. The FMLN's Reyes remembers, "the municipal government of ARENA that lost the elections carried out completely illegal acts that amounted to giving away the fundamental wealth of the city: an ecological park, a lagoon."

Between election day and Funes' inauguration as mayor, the Alegría lagoon and a tourist center were leased to a private company on 15 year contracts. The town's stadium was rented to a privately-owned soccer team. On May 1st, when Funes and his staff opened the small, three-room mayor's office, they were surprised to see what else had been given away: over half of the computers and the city car. The city's bank account was nearly empty.

Soon after Funes took office, the death threats started arriving to his cellular phone from an anonymous computer address. Unlike the mayor, who until his death did not denounce the threats, Funes' close friend, the local priest, received threats as well and requested a transfer to a different parish. Soon after his transfer was granted, the violence started.

Funes' father, José Angel Funes, was shot and badly wounded on April 26, 2006, just days before his son was inaugurated. He survived, and as the case unfolded, even mainstream media had to admit that the identity of the man responsible made a political motive for the crime an unavoidable possibility. The suspect was ARENA activist José Monterrosa, blood brother of Colonel Domingo Monterrosa, who, among other crimes, was responsible for the deaths of over 900 innocent people in 1981 in the most infamous massacre of the Civil War, the El Mozote Massacre.

History Leans Towards 2009

"We are not in the pre-campaign anymore. The election season has now begun," says Alegría councilwoman Lilian Astrid Cortez. In El Salvador, politics go hand-in-hand with violence and insecurity. And with the election now less than a year away, the assassination of Moises Funes sets an ominous tone for campaign season.

"Each time that a campaign draws near in which the anxieties of the right wing grow, we see how their attitude becomes more violent, more aggressive," said the FMLN's Reyes. "We in El Salvador have a right wing that is very radical in ideological and political terms, a right wing with a tradition of violence and disrespect for life, and a right wing that does not accept, mentally they do not accept, that an opposition party could come to govern."

In this context, continuing impunity in a high-profile, politically-motivated assassination such that of Funes sets a dangerous precedent. With El Salvador's presidential, legislative and municipal elections all scheduled for early 2009, social organizations and the FMLN continue to demand justice in the case of Moises Funes and Zulma Rivera, and will continue to do so until the truth is known. ■

from www.whenthereisjustice.blogspot.com

Intervention *cont. from pg. 3*

the United States are either undocumented – living and working in constant jeopardy of detention and deportation – or in the U.S. through a special Temporary Protected Status (TPS) granted by the Department of Homeland Security. In both cases, these immigrants' ability to remain in the U.S. is highly tenuous and depends upon the continued good graces of the U.S. government – a reality of which Salvadoran families are all too well aware. The Bush administration and right-wing members of Congress have exploited this dynamic to help sway El Salvador's last two elections.

In the lead-up to 2004's Salvadoran presidential election, Representatives Tom Tancrado (R-CO), Dan Burton (R-IN), and Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) issued a threat: if the leftist FMLN party were to win the presidency, "it could mean a radical change in United States policy as it pertains to the essentially free-flow of remittances from Salvadorans living in the United States to El Salvador." This threatened blackmail against the Salvadoran people, widely reported in the Salvadoran media, would have crippled El Salvador's economy overnight if it were carried out. U.S. State Department officials in Washington and at the embassy in San Salvador contributed ominous warnings about the U.S.'s inability to cooperate with an FMLN government. In a country that depends upon friendly relations with the U.S., these threats played an important role in ARENA's electoral victory in 2004.

Just weeks before the 2006 legislative and municipal elections, President Saca flew to Washington for a high-profile, meeting/photo op with President Bush where it was announced that TPS status for Salvadorans living the U.S. would be renewed, thanks to the special relationship between the U.S. and Salvadoran governments. Front page photos of the two leaders shaking hands were provided ARENA with invaluable campaign propaganda, again based upon the myth that the right-wing party's hold of the government was the only thing preventing hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans from being deported from the U.S. TPS is scheduled to expire again in March 2009, which coincidentally is the same month that El Salvador holds presidential elections.

With the Bush administration in lame-duck mode, and with attention on the U.S. elections lessening Congressional oversight, it can be expected that U.S. intervention in El Salvador's campaign will again take place. *continued on pg. 6*

DOJ *cont. from pg. 1*

Washington Post article doesn't even refer to CISPES.

So what to make of all this? Well, it shows that the Bush Administration is terrified of another Latin American country electing a Left party. The Salvadoran FMLN and its candidate Funes have gained broad support 12 months ahead of the 2009 election, in large part due to the failure of U.S.-supported neoliberal policies like CAFTA.

Moreover, it shows a dangerous trend towards possible U.S. intervention in the 2009 elections should Funes stay on top. In 2004, the last time the FMLN had a chance to win the presidency, U.S. government officials issued statements showing clear support for the right-wing ARENA party and threatening to cut off money sent from Salvadorans in the U.S. to their families should the FMLN win. Such actions are a disruption of the Salvadoran electoral process, undermining the country's sovereignty and self-determination.

Recalling the Past

In 1981 the FBI investigated CISPES for allegedly acting as a foreign agent of the FMLN. When that claim proved baseless, the Department of Justice launched a full-scale investigation based on the claim that CISPES was a front for the "terrorist" FMLN. The FBI campaign of surveillance, harassment, and intimidation of CISPES lasted until 1987 and ultimately became a major embarrassment for the Bureau. Subsequent Congressional hearings showed the FBI to have conducted numerous illegal operations, led to an internal inquiry by the Bureau, and curtailed the scope of domestic surveillance activities (later expanded again under the USA PATRIOT Act.)

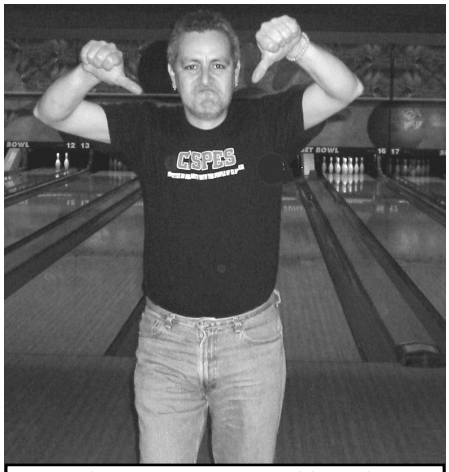
Despite the fact that the 1980s witch-hunt was a failure, the Bush Administration is back at it again, using the same law – FARA – to threaten CISPES. Our lawyer, Mara Verheyden-Hilliard from the Partnership for Civil Justice, put it very clearly: "That the Department of Justice would wrongly evoke the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) to target this organization at this particular moment demonstrates the Administration's fear of progressive change sweeping Latin America. It is an effort to intimidate and stifle solidarity groups in the U.S. who oppose the Government's efforts to install puppet regimes against the will of the people of Latin America."

Indeed, as more and more progressive forces take power in Latin America, the Bush Administration is looking for ways to bolster its few remaining allies and to thwart the rise of parties like the FMLN. But the U.S.'s tactics of harassment and intimidation will not stop our solidarity work. CISPES will continue its work of supporting real democracy and human rights in El Salvador by taking delegations of elections observers to El Salvador in March and January of 2009, by touring prominent Salvadoran labor leaders and human rights advocates in the U.S., and by continuing to oppose the U.S.-sponsored ILEA. We will also confront any and every attempt by the U.S. government to undermine the will of the Salvadoran people in their effort to elect an alternative government in 2009. ■

Check out our website to view the Department of Justice letter, the CISPES response, and articles about the history of FBI harassment targeting CISPES in the 1980s.

Seattle CISPES Committee Update

by Alexandria DeLong, Seattle CISPES



Seattle CISPES activist Eddie Salazar simultaneously expresses his disappointment in having bowled a gutter ball and his disapproval of the International Law Enforcement Academy

2008 is off to an eventful start here in Seattle. We have been busy with political work, fundraising, and athletic endeavors, and we look forward to continuing our efforts in all three areas in the coming months.

Throughout the day of January 23, Seattle CISPES and over a dozen allied organizations hand-delivered letters to the office of U.S. Representative Jim McDermott in a coordinated effort to persuade him to work to shut down the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) in El Salvador. The letters expressed grave concern that the US State Department is training El Salvador's repressive and politicized National Civilian Police at this institution, which is funded by U.S. taxpayers.

Representative McDermott responded positively to Seattle CISPES in a letter a few weeks later, using much of the same language that our letters had contained. He addressed our concerns and agreed to work with the Appropriations Committee in Congress to reshape the funding for the ILEA program. He expressed gratitude for our concern and encouraged our efforts to raise awareness in hopes that it will spur congressional action. Representative McDermott's support of CISPES' campaign will have an influence in addressing the way US tax dollars support repression in El Salvador.

On February 23rd, 18 CISPES activists and students from Seattle University participated in a "Bowl-a-Thon" fundraising event at Sunset Bowl in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood. The bowlers requested donations from friends and family to "sponsor" their participation. The Bowl-a-Thon raised over $1800 to support Seattle CISPES grassroots organizing!

Not only was the event a great success financially, it was also a fun way to get activists together. Munching on snacks and wearing funny shoes is great for bonding volunteers and maintaining positive morale. From "granny-style" rollers to powerful throwers, everyone had a unique bowling style that provided some good-natured laughs. The highest and lowest scoring bowlers received yummy, fair trade prizes, which came in gift baskets. Top bowler Nathan Maas found his basket to also be a lovely decoration for his bike. He may find the basket useful in the next CISPES fundraiser…

Seattle CISPES' first ever "Solidarity Cycle," taking place on May 3rd and 4th, is a creative way to raise awareness about the political issues facing El Salvador while raising funds to put toward our grassroots organizing efforts. Through the Solidarity Cycle we will raise awareness of U.S. intervention in El Salvador's upcoming elections, and build the movement to stop it!

On May 1st we will host a send-off party in Seattle to maintain momentum from the May Day march and prepare cyclists for their journey toward Olympia. On Saturday the 3rd we will begin the trip via bicycle toward Tacoma, where we will work with friendly organizations to host yet another inspiring solidarity event. Cyclists and the support crew will stay the night in Tacoma and head to Olympia the following morning. On the afternoon of May 4th we will arrive in Olympia for a final educational event with our sister CISPES chapter. Following the event, participants will return to Seattle with a greater understanding of our mission and motivation to keep our movement running (or cycling). Sponsored cyclists will raise money for material aid to fund our partner organizations in El Salvador, and the educational events will show other participants the importance of our cause. This effort to raise money and awareness will be an exercise of commitment to the people of El Salvador. ■

INTERVENTION continued from pg. 5

Just as CISPES has mobilized to resist U.S.-backed repression and attacks on Salvadoran democracy, we are now gearing up to confront electoral intervention. We will seek and publicize pledges of non-intervention from members of Congress, organize delegations to El Salvador, and explore creative ways to use media in the U.S. and El Salvador to dispel myths and threats propagated by U.S. and Salvadoran officials. The Salvadoran people have worked for decades to build true, grassroots democracy. At this critical juncture, with historic elections on the horizon, CISPES will do all it can to ensure that the voice of the Salvadoran people is heard, free from manipulation and intervention by the U.S. government. ■

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1525 Newton st. NW
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(202) 521-2510
www.cispes.org

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