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El Salvador: Spectre of War Looms After 15 Years of Peace

by Raúl Gutiérrez

SAN SALVADOR - Violent clashes between the police and demonstrators are sounding alarm bells for the peaceful coexistence that was achieved in El Salvador in the 1990s after 12 years of civil war, say human rights lawyers, analysts and activists.

The armed conflict that broke out in 1980 came to an end with the signing of the peace accords, but now “the rule of law and respect for human rights are crumbling,” one observer said.

The government of former President Alfredo Cristiani (1989-1994) and the leftwing guerrillas of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) signed a peace accord in Mexico in 1992 which provided for the demilitarisation and democratisation of society, respect for basic rights and the rule of law.

Some points of the accord have been fulfilled, acknowledge political and religious leaders, particularly in regard to changes in the armed forces, and the creation of some limited space for democracy, but they are not optimistic and warn that backward motion on the peace agreement is endangering the process that began 15 years ago.

Against this background, David Morales of Tutela Legal (Legal Guardians), a human rights agency of the Roman Catholic Church, told IPS that “the police attack on Jul. 2 was arbitrary, and reflects an authoritarian attitude.”

That day, 12 members of social organisations and one journalist were arrested and accused of “acts of terrorism” after violent incidents in Suchitoto, a tourist centre 47 kilometres from San Salvador.

The National Civil Police (PNC) used “disproportionate force,” injuring at least 100 protesters and residents, he added.



Policemen detain demonstrators during a protest against Salvadoran President Tony Saca in Suchitoto, El Salvador, July 2, 2007.
REUTERS/Luis Galdamez (EL SALVADOR)

Morales also reported that according to the testimony of Tutela Legal lawyers and relatives of those arrested, some of them were subjected to psychological torture while being transported in a police helicopter.

“The PNC beat, threatened and tortured several detainees, swerving the helicopter around in such a way that the handcuffed prisoners slid towards the doors, and were in danger of falling out” high above the ground, said Morales, a former assistant prosecutor for the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman.

Upon landing, “the police carried out simulated summary executions,” he said.

The people who were arrested had participated along with hundreds of residents and activists from civil society organisations in a protest in Suchitoto, where President Antonio Saca was to announce a plan to decentralise drinking water services.

Critics of the government plan, however, said it was an attempt to privatise water distribution.

Demonstrators blocked the roads along which the members of the government and the diplomatic corps would approach the town. They were attacked by a PNC anti-riot squad.

The protest stopped the official rally, and the president had to leave by helicopter in the wake of the violence which disturbed the almost permanent peace of Suchitoto, a colonial city founded in 1525, with stone-paved streets and houses with white walls and red-tiled roofs, which is a popular tourist destination.

A local television channel broadcast images of the police action, which showed how the vehicle carrying Lorena Martínez, one of the organisers of the protest, was intercepted by the police and its driver violently removed and thrown onto the road, on the pretext that he had obstructed the passage of the police.

Martínez, president of the Association of Rural Communities for the Development of El Salvador (CRIPDES), and her vice president Rosa María Valle, were arrested when they complained about this treatment. So was Haydée Chicas, who was filming the incident, although she shouted repeatedly that she was a journalist.

The arrests took place when the women and the driver were on their way to Suchitoto to participate in the demonstration.

Another video, which was not broadcast on local media, shows demonstrators asking the PNC not to use force, while they advanced on and manhandled the residents.

The anti-riot squad are seen using their truncheons, tear gas and rubber bullets. Some police officers hit one of the detainees on the head several times while he was vomiting from the effects of the tear gas.

The video also shows protesters retaliating by throwing rocks at police as two helicopters overfly the area.

Photographer Luis Galdámez of the Reuters news agency, the only foreign correspondent present on the scene, saw several army vehicles with high-calibre machine guns. He was also beaten by police, although he told them he was a journalist and showed his press credentials.

Last weekend all the detainees, bar one, were provisionally sent to prison for up to three months by Judge Lucila Fuentes, on charges of “acts of terrorism.” The prosecution, meanwhile, is seeking more evidence.

If the accused are found guilty, they could be liable to prison sentences of up to 60 years, according to the anti-terrorist law in force since October 2006.

CRIPDES leaders Bernardo Beloso and Pedro Juan Hernández told IPS that the arrests “are part of a policy of state terrorism by the Saca administration against any protest by social organisations.”

“In El Salvador, fighting for a solution to the communities’ problems, and against water privatisation, is interpreted by this government as a terrorist act,” they said.

Political scientist Napoleón Campos said that these events reflect “a notorious deterioration in political coexistence, since the basic conditions for mediation have broken down.”

“We are entering into a very serious situation, generated as much by the left as by the right,” he told IPS. What has happened must be interpreted within the context of a campaign in advance of the next presidential elections, which has already begun although elections are not due until early 2009, he said.

Campos said that the demonstration in Suchitoto was not exactly a peaceful protest, as roads were blocked and the protesters threw stones, but that the irrational use of force by the PNC and the charges of terrorism against the detainees were also reprehensible.

The expert disagreed with statements by social leaders to the effect that their colleagues are “political prisoners.” He said that was “to exaggerate the case.”

Counsel for the Ombudsman’s Human Rights Office, Oscar Luna, and vice president of the National Association of Private Enterprise (ANEP), Carmen de Alfaro, also said in an interview on television that the detainees may be accused of other crimes, but not of “acts of terrorism.”

The El Salvador Association of Journalists and Reporters Without Borders (RSF - Reporters Sans Frontières) condemned the arrest of journalist Chicas, and called for her immediate release.

“The detention of Chicas represents a grave abuse of authority. It is ridiculous and dangerous to claim that someone who was just doing her job as a journalist was caught in the act of ‘terrorism,’” an RSF communiqué said.

In the middle of the week, President Saca announced that he would “gladly” review the case.

Tutela Legal’s Morales is adamant that the anti-terrorist law is being used to criminalise those who protest against the government. In his view, Judge Fuentes’ ruling demonstrates the existence of “biddable judges in the service of the authoritarian model that is being set up in El Salvador.”

In terms of respect for human rights, we have fallen badly behind what was achieved at the signing of the peace accords, Morales said.

The spectre of violence in this country, which is still in the process of recovering from a civil war that divided it for over a decade, has not returned only because of the disturbances of Jul. 2. It has deeper roots associated with the unhealed wounds of this society.

Months ago, the auxiliary bishop of San Salvador, Gregorio Rosa Chávez, said that “since we signed the peace, poverty and unemployment have increased, and there is a great sense of insecurity among the people. We signed the peace, but we do not have reconciliation in the country.”

“The government does not recognise that the causes (of violence) are linked to structural injustice, and that the injustice continues,” the bishop complained. “Therefore we have another kind of war, and we see people dying every day.”

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