



# NATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST IN THE U.S.A.

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### PRESS STATEMENT

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### U.S. RELIGIOUS LEADERS PROTEST REPRESSION IN EL SALVADOR AND URGE NO U.S. MILITARY AID

A delegation of American religious leaders returned today from El Salvador and called for an end to United States military aid. The group met with Archbishop Oscar Romero, the human rights leader who was assassinated hours later as he celebrated mass in a hospital chapel. The archbishop had reaffirmed his profound concern for the suffering of the Salvadorean people under the growing repressive violence carried on by various branches of the security forces and paramilitary groups.

The religious delegation also met with a wide spectrum of government, church and opposition figures as well as refugees from the violence in the countryside and in the cities. They also met with the U.S. ambassador and a Christian Democratic member of the junta. The members of the delegation were: Fr. Alan McCoy, OFM, former president, Conference of Major Superiors of Men in the USA, Roman Catholic Church; Betty Nute, Vice-chair, board of directors, American Friends Service Committee, Thomas Quigley, Office of Justice and Peace, U.S. Catholic Conference; Rev. William Wipfler, director, Office of Human Rights, National Council of Churches, Ronald Young, National Secretary, Peace Education Division, American Friends Service Committee

The delegation visited El Salvador to express support for church efforts to bring about a just peace, to deepen their understanding of the current situation, and to report findings to the U.S. government, church constituencies and the public. Key findings of the group were:

- Since the governing junta took power on January 9, 1980 through March 13, 682 persons were killed and 176 disappeared in repressive violence carried out by National Guard, various police organizations and occasionally the army working with ORDEN, a right-wing paramilitary group supposedly proscribed by the junta.
- The repression is a brutal and systematic process aimed at elimination of leaders and supporters of peasant organizations. The vast majority of those killed have been victims of this campaign of terror and not, as claimed by the government, victims of armed confrontation.
- Rape, torture, mutilation, decapitation, garroting and the murder of defenseless men, women, children are carried out not simply to eliminate opponents but to terrorize the entire population.
- The U.S. Government's view that there is no alternative to the present government is in error. The popular organizations are broad-based and widening their support. A broad

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coalition of peasant, labor, intellectual, student, religious, and professional sectors is in the process of formation. Marxists are present, as are Social Democrats and people of the center.

- The U.S. Embassy appears to have very poor information about and contacts with opposition political parties and grass-roots peasant organizations.
- Contrary to claims that the governing junta finds itself caught in the broad center between a handful of extremists of left and right--they are only supported by a minority of the population. Furthermore, the delegation found that repression responds to impetus coming from elements at the highest levels of the government.

The delegation called on the U.S. Government to halt immediately any assistance to the military and police forces of El Salvador. Specifically, they called on Congress to reject Carter Administration plans to reprogram \$5.7 million in military aid.

The archbishop, the delegation said, was probably killed for having called in his homily Sunday, March 23, on the common soldiers of El Salvador to obey a higher law and refuse to carry out orders to kill. They recalled the archbishop's letter to President Carter imploring him not to send military aid.

## ECUMENICAL VISIT TO EL SALVADOR

March 22-25, 1980

### ORIGINS AND PURPOSE

Last month, Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador sent a personal letter to our President protesting United States military aid to his embattled country. Writing as to a fellow Christian, the Archbishop made clear to Mr. Carter that the Salvadorean church, and indeed the majority of concerned Salvadoreans, were strongly opposed to any U.S. intervention.

Since U.S. policy seemed firmly committed to just such a course, and since the official response to the Archbishop's letter was less than adequate, a representative group of concerned church agencies determined to send an ecumenical team to El Salvador:

first, to express by our presence the strong support and solidarity of North American Christians for Archbishop Romero and, through him, all the suffering people and church of El Salvador;

second, to conduct a brief but intensive investigation of the current Salvadorean situation, beyond the extensive documentation and other information already available to us;

third, to communicate our findings and recommendations to several relevant bodies:

- to our government, concerning the implications of its current policies,
- to our churches and private voluntary organizations concerning possible needs for humanitarian aid, and
- to the concerned public at large, that a picture of the Salvadorean reality more accurate than we felt was generally the case be made available.

### PARTICIPANTS AND PROGRAM

The visit was organized jointly by the American Friends Service Committee, the National Council of Churches, the United States Catholic Conference, and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men in the USA. The names of the participants can be found on the final page of this report.

In slightly less than four days, the delegation visited with and took testimony from a score of refugees -- men, women, and children -- in two different refugee centers; visited and held extensive discussions at the Juridical Aid offices of the Archdiocese, the Ecumenical Committee for Humanitarian Aid, the Salvadorean Commission for Human Rights, the United States Embassy, and the Presidency of the Republic. We met with representatives of all the mass-based popular organizations participating in the Movement for National Unity, with Ambassador Robert White, with Jose Antonio Morales Erlich, Christian Democratic member of the Governing Junta, with priests and religious, intellectuals and social workers and humble campesinos, some of them with still fresh wounds, some of them children just recently orphaned.

## THE ASSASSINATION

Before leaving the United States, we received the full support of Monsignor Romero for our proposed visit and were most warmly received by him on arrival. We all shared with him in the eucharistic celebration in the Basilica on Sunday morning where he introduced each of us with words of warm gratitude.

His homily that morning, heard by hundreds of thousands across the country through the just-reopened radio YSAX, was one of his strongest and most passionate pleas for peace. He begged, pleaded with, and finally commanded the Christians within the security forces to stop absolutely all repression, if by no other way than by individually refusing to carry out unjust orders to kill.

While many predicted some violent response to his words, all were stunned by what did follow. At mid-point in our visit, the evening of Monday, March 24, an assassin's bullet ended the life of one of the world's best known and most loved pastors, as he offered mass in a hospital chapel.

## FINDINGS

The following represent our most important findings:

1. The people of El Salvador suffer under a massive and widespread repression inflicted by official security forces and paramilitary groups. We have found that the violent acts that are taking place demonstrate a pattern of premeditated violation of fundamental human rights and not the result of occasional excesses committed by poorly trained forces.
2. The number of victims of repression by security forces and right-wing paramilitary groups has dramatically increased since the initiation of the second Junta on January 9, 1980. In this two and one-half month period 682 persons have been killed, 211 have been detained, and 176 have disappeared, figures which far exceed those of the entire three-year regime of General Romero. These violations have been carried out by the National Guard, various police organizations, and occasionally the Army, working in collaboration with ORDEN (a paramilitary group that has been proscribed by the Junta).
3. The repression is a brutal and systematic process that the delegation believes is aimed at eliminating peasants who are members or supporters of popular organizations. Personal testimony and other evidence indicate that security forces frequently attack communities with prepared lists of the names of such persons or accompanied by local members of ORDEN who identify them.
4. While the agrarian reform has resulted in the expropriation of large landholdings and, in many cases, the peaceful incorporation of peasants into cooperatives, there is ample evidence that in other areas the process is a violent one. The National Guardsmen who are ostensibly sent to protect the seized properties accompany members of the proscribed ORDEN to search out and eliminate peasants in the area who are identified as members of organized peasant groups considered to be leftist.

5. Personal and documentary testimony shows that violations are occurring with greater frequency in areas where no agrarian reform is taking place. Security forces and ORDEN are engaged in a campaign of premeditated and ruthless attacks on peasants belonging to organizations. The vast majority of those killed have been the victims of this campaign and not, as it is claimed by the government, victims of armed confrontations.
6. The delegation was particularly shocked by the barbarity of the repression. We have heard testimony from eyewitnesses of rape, torture, mutilation, decapitation, garroting, and the murder of unarmed and defenseless men, women, and children. The security forces burned fields and forests and destroyed bridges to prevent people from escaping the atrocities.
7. It is our judgment that the repression is not only for the purpose of eliminating organized peasants or leadership of other sectors, but is particularly severe and barbaric in order to intimidate and terrorize actual or potential opposition. It has been conceded by a member of the Junta that "the right has great force and contact in the Army at the middle and lower levels, and some would say at the highest levels." The delegation is convinced that the repression responds to impetus coming in part from the highest levels of government.
8. Although representatives of the government and the U.S. Ambassador told us that the government does not condone such acts, we have learned of no instance where a member of the official security forces, ORDEN, or other right-wing paramilitary groups have been arrested, charged, tried, or punished for such gross violations of human rights and civil law. Furthermore, as long as ORDEN continues to function it is clear that the government is not in compliance with one of the principle recommendations of the Organization of American States Human Rights Commission.
9. We found increasing need for humanitarian help as suffering, especially in the countryside, becomes ever more acute. At the same time, ability to respond to these needs is severely handicapped by an apparent identification by the government of medical help as a weapon to be used in an insurrection, felt to be imminent. Thus it is claimed that the country's hospital system has been 'militarized,' official obstacles (including importation restrictions) being placed in the way of access by the people to medical supplies and equipment. Even emergency blood is said to be available only to hospitals.
10. Largely as a result of its clearly evidenced failure to halt the repression due to lack of unity of purpose, the government is widely seen as unable to effectively implement its announced reforms, whatever the intentions of its individual members may be.
11. We found evidence of significant support for popular organizations opposed to the present junta. At the same time we were disturbed by the apparent lack of information and bias about popular organization among U.S. officials with whom we spoke. The popular organizations, which began in the mid-1970s, often building on the Church's pastoral work, are both overcoming their divisions and broadening their support base. In January 1980 the formation of a unified coordinating committee was announced, which observers see as a sign of increasing maturity.

These organizations are in a process of forming coalitions with political parties and groups representing professionals and technicians, small and medium businesspeople, church groups, and other sectors, and they have presented an outline of a government program. Archbishop Romero publically encouraged these movements toward unity and opening to other sectors.

Opponents of the popular organizations claim they are armed groups supported by only a small fraction of the population. We are inclined to accept the judgment of many serious people that these are fundamentally political groups whose main activity has been non-violent (marches, demonstrations, occupation, distributing leaflets).

Indications of their popular support were seen in a recent 24-hour strike which closed down much of the country's economy and in a January demonstration in which many thousands (estimates vary from 50,000 to 300,000) marched in spite of almost certain attack. Twenty persons were in fact killed. By contrast, the Junta does not attempt to organize any demonstration of popular support, even though this would involve minimal risk.

12. We believe the conflict in El Salvador must be considered in its regional context. Other Central and Latin American countries and the United States seem intent on preventing "another Nicaragua." There are reports that right-wing groups in Guatemala deem it imperative to fight the "battle against Communism" in El Salvador. We heard serious people estimate that such an all-out confrontation could cost 200,000 lives (five times as many as in Nicaragua). Others fear a multi-nation military force under U.S. sponsorship which could perhaps put down popular groups, at the cost of thousands of human lives, but could only impose a government and would not solve the country's underlying problems.
13. We encountered the overwhelming opinion that U.S. policy continues to frustrate the will of the majority of the people of El Salvador.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

We address the following recommendations to the government and the people of the United States:

1. We urge that the United States immediately halt all assistance to the military and police of El Salvador. Specifically, we call on the Congress to reject the current request by the Carter Administration for \$5.7 million in military aid. Approval of the request would certainly be viewed as a clear sign of U.S. support for the repression and would undermine the long range interests of the United States. U.S. aid to the military in the current situation cannot be separated from the long history of U.S. support for military dictatorships in El Salvador and throughout Central America. In this respect, any U.S. military aid is viewed as intervention by the vast majority of Salvadoreans and seen as support for violent repression by the military and the ultra-right paramilitary. Finally, whatever the purposes or types of aid, control over how it will be used clearly cannot be guaranteed.

2. We urge that the United States immediately undertake serious efforts to widen its contacts and relationships with popular organizations in El Salvador, such as those which participate in the Movement for National Unity and other groups. These organizations represent the sentiments of a large number of Salvadoreans; they are important in the present situation; and they will play an important role in any resolution of the conflict in El Salvador. It is tragically clear that decades of U.S. ties to the military and the wealthy oligarchy severely limits U.S. experiences and perceptions in relationship to what is happening in El Salvador today. We fear that the close ties between the U.S. and the present junta -- through unilateral or multilateral assistance -- is shortsighted in terms of U.S. interests. At the same time, it provides tangible support for increasing repression and violence.

We recommend to the churches that they urge their appropriate offices or agencies:

1. to respond promptly and generously to responsible requests for
  - a. emergency help in housing, feeding, and caring for refugees fleeing repression in the countryside;
  - b. medical supplies and equipment for village clinics, devising the means to ensure the delivery of such aid to the most needy.
2. to awaken their constituencies to a concern for the immense suffering of the Salvadorean people and to concrete ways, including visits to El Salvador to increase understanding, in which they may respond both as Christians and as U.S. citizens.
3. to propose or support the posthumous nomination of Archbishop Oscar Romero for the Nobel peace prize.

### CONCLUSIONS

We return from El Salvador more acutely aware of the daily toll of suffering and death inflicted on the Salvadorean people, including its recent victim, Monsignor Oscar Romero, himself a prophet of justice and peace. It has been our privilege to be close to Archbishop Romero in the last days and hours of his life. We could hear and see for ourselves the source of his strength and inspiration.

We heard those courageous words of his Lenten message spoken to soldiers, which perhaps impelled the final decision to murder him, "I implore you, I beg you, I order you, in God's name: stop the repression!"

Archbishop Romero's basic concern has been evangelization -- shedding the light of the Gospel on what happens in people's lives. His strength is not that of a solitary prophet but rather that of one who listened and consulted, meditated and prayed, and spoke the truth. Monsignor Romero has been the voice of the poor, the suffering, the persecuted, such as the hundreds of refugees who have flocked to the archdiocesan offices seeking his protection. As one humble peasant described how she made the journey to the city from the countryside where she had witnessed brutal torture and murder by the security forces, she said, "Even though we did not know where we would go, we were willing to go with our Companion."

The enemies of the Archbishop may think they can silence his voice with a bullet. We are confident that the community to which he gave voice will continue to denounce sin, injustice, and repression and to announce hope and resurrection.

We join the Archbishop in his denunciations and in his hope.

FATHER ALAN MCCOY, President, Conference of Major Superiors of  
Men in the USA, Roman Catholic Church

BETTY NUTE, Vice-Chair, National Board of Directors, American  
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REVEREND WILLIAM WIFFLER, Director, Office of Human Rights,  
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