"We are not only fighting for our children; now we are fighting for the survival of our people"

El Salvador's Mothers of Intervention

BY CHRISTINE DUGAS

A dozen peasant women have gathered on a sultry morning in downtown San Salvador for the Mothers' weekly committee meeting. There is no coffee, no lighthearted conversation in the bare room. A palpable anxiety grips the assembly. It is becoming increasingly dangerous to oppose the government they believe is holding their missing children.

Since 1977 the Committee of Mothers of Political Prisoners and Missing Persons has fought for their children's freedom. The fact that they are known as "the Mothers" hampers the Salvadoran Government's normally brutal style of putting down opposition. The women wield a formidable weapon—their own motherhood—and the government doesn't want to risk national and international censure by attacking them.

A year ago the Committee of Mothers asserted that there were more than five hundred missing persons in El Salvador. Today they aren't counting. According to the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA), in 1980 there were ten thousand victims of political assassination in explosive El Salvador.

"At first we tried legal means to find our children," a broad-faced, middle-aged spokeswoman told me last April, "but it didn't work." Then in May, 1978, the group began to change its tactics. For three months the Mothers forcibly occupied the Red Cross office in San Salvador, refusing to leave the downtown building, which was soon draped in antigovernment banners. The women used the site as a soapbox to confront the government with demands for their missing children and to publicize the torture and massacres that plague El Salvador. They claimed that the Red Cross cooperates with the government and that many poor people who have gone there for help later disappeared.

"As usual we did not receive a response from the government," the spokeswoman sighed. "We did achieve another objective, though. Countries around the world found out about the situation in El Salvador. According to the tourist brochures, we are the country with a smile. But we have no smile here, only hunger and death."

Most of the Mothers are uneducated peasants, who often live in one or two-room thatched-roof frame houses without electricity or running water or in cardboard dwellings put together with scraps scrounged from the dump. All share the loss of a family member. In the three years since the group began, the women have found support in each other. Though unschooled, many have learned to speak easily and unselfconsciously before audiences. This morning, seated erectly on straightbacked chairs that line the dreary walls, they spoke to me of their travels to Europe and other Central American countries, funded by Amnesty International and other European-based human rights organizations.

The Salvadoran Government is no admirer of these efforts, however. Before his overthrow in October, 1979, President Carlos Humberto Romero denounced the Mothers as a disgrace to the country. "But we aren't slandering El Salvador!" exclaims a woman in a faded print dress. "We're talking about our reality here. For us 1979, from its very beginning, was a bloody year."

One day in May, sixty antigovernment demonstrators who were seeking refuge in San Salvador's downtown cathedral were shot and killed by Salvadoran police. "In May, the month of the mother, Romero gave us the gift of only more bloody massacres."

A heavy-set, rugged woman opens the drawstrings of an old cotton purse. Tenderly she pulls out a photograph wrapped in plastic. "This is my son," she tells me. "When we found his body, it was so mutilated that I only recognized him by scraps of clothing. He was twenty-three."

She found his abandoned body in the countryside, the face hacked away by a machete. According to Salvadoran law, she could not move the body without first requesting permission in the nearest town. There she had to wait to see the proper officials and to pay a tax for moving the body.

Not all of the committee members attend the meetings. Some cannot leave their young children or cannot afford the bus fare to the capital. Many fear being caught in the frequent and violent raids that terrorize the countryside.

"We must pretend we are coming to the city to go to the market," says a wizened, gray-haired woman pushing a resolute chicken back into her plastic market bag. The noisy load helped her to get through the road blocks. "It is a risk," she adds, "because now even women aren't respected."
Waves of violence sweep down on the poor villages of El Salvador. Many peasants no longer dare sleep in their homes, hiding in different places in the countryside at night. But now brushfires are set to rouse the peasants from their cover, consuming Salvadoran hillsides. Amnesty International reported one such case last year, when the Salvadoran troops lit a circle of fire around a village in the department of Chalatenango to prevent anyone's escape. Troops then entered the village and killed forty people.

**LURKING POWER**

In El Salvador most of the repression has taken place in the countryside. Peasant organizations and unions have never been sanctioned. Even today the government fears the lurking power of the unorganized peasantry more than the organized revolutionary forces. Though Salvadoran history books ignore it, the government has not forgotten the peasant revolt in 1932. That movement ripened during the severe economic crisis of the '30s, when unemployment rose to high levels and the price of coffee, Salvador's major export, fell drastically. This aggravated an already tense situation in El Salvador, where even until recently 1 per cent of the population has owned 40 per cent of the land. (This minority is often referred to as the “fourteen families,” said to control the country's wealth and power.) The Communist party, formed at this time, was able to organize discontented workers and peasants, especially those in the coffee-growing areas.

Finally, in January, 1932, when the government refused to recognize the Communist party victories in local elections, a peasant uprising was touched off. Leaders of the revolt were arrested at the last minute; and though they tried to call it off, it was too late to stop the rebellion in the countryside. The Salvadoran Government moved swiftly, and in the following weeks the army invaded the countryside, killing thirty thousand peasants—4 per cent of the total population. There have been nearly fifty years of military rule since then. Wealth and power are still controlled by a small minority, who view the country's festering slums through the tinted windows of a sleek and chauffeur-driven Mercedes Benz.

In October, 1979, under pressure from the United States, the Salvadoran military ousted President Romero in a peaceful coup. It was in part through the efforts of groups like the Mothers that the Romero regime was discredited. He was replaced by a military-civilian junta that promised broad social reforms, including amnesty for political prisoners.

The Mothers immediately pressured the government to free their children. “We had two interviews with the junta, but we didn't get anywhere. Finally, they denied there are any political prisoners in El Salvador and invited us to look through the public prisons ourselves. We refused. We knew we wouldn't find our children there. If they are alive, they are in clandestine prisons,” a mother declares.

The women blame the terrorism on the government armed forces and on rightist paramilitary groups. The largest of these, ORDEN, is a particular threat in the countryside because many of its members are themselves peasants who want the benefits of the group's power. They are "armed spies" who hunt down and eliminate anyone suspected of being "subversive."

“When the poor people in our country ask for more salary because they can't live on what they have, ORDEN and the government say they are Communists. But it isn't like that,” another woman says angrily. “That isn't communism, it's necessity!”

“A country as poor as ours is now exporting seafood and our own people cannot afford to eat it,” she adds. El Salvador is known internationally for its miles of Pacific beaches. But along El Salvador's coast, billboards for Catalina swimsuits hide tin-roofed shacks and naked children. Private beach-front homes and clubs push the poor off the land. “Fishermen are not allowed to take fish home so their families have something to eat,” the mother states. “The fishing company caught one man trying to do that and they shot him when he wouldn't throw the fish back.”

The Mothers say that at first they had some hope the new junta would change things. “Instead of this, the exact opposite is true. The massacres continue, only worse now.” El Salvador's Human Rights Commission has reported that the level of repression since the October coup is higher than in any period since the 1932 massacre.

One sign of this was the resignation of all the civilian members of the new junta and cabinet early in January, 1980. They announced they would no longer participate in a government that can't control its own military and only pretends to support social change. By stepping down they hoped to make it apparent that the new government is only masquerading as a moderate ruling junta and is increasingly controlled by right-wing military officers.

Shortly after the resignations, three major grass roots organizations and one political party that opposes the government joined forces. A demonstration was held on the anniversary of the 1932 massacre to support the new opposition group unity. More than a hundred thousand workers, students, and peasants poured into the streets of downtown San Salvador for the demonstration. Businesses closed. Women set up stations with drinking water for the marchers. As I walked along with the crowd I met some of the Mothers fanning...
themselves on a corner, waiting for the rest of the committee to pass by with a banner supporting the new unity.

It was impossible to tell where the crowd began or ended, but soon the red-and-white banner of the Committee of Mothers appeared from around the corner and was met with applause from the spectators. Minutes later gunfire ripped through the marchers ahead of me, silencing their chanting. The crowd recoiled and panicked. Witnesses claimed that guardsmen shot down on the crowd from the national palace. Later I found that the Mothers were unhurt, but thirty-nine marchers were dead and more than a hundred wounded.

**SURVIVAL**

Unemployment and prices are increasing along with violence. The wealthy escape to Miami, while the poor must try to cope with the steadily deteriorating situation. “We will keep working together,” a mother asserts, “but even as we are fighting now, our families continue to fall victims.”

Recently it has become more difficult for the women to keep up their work. Since the spring of last year violence has intensified. It was then that El Salvador’s Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, outspoken defender of human rights, was assassinated while saying mass. Although originally a conservative clergyman, Romero had become a strong supporter of the peasants, and on the day before his death he had urged his country’s soldiers to stop killing their brothers and to obey God’s laws before their officer’s commands. Since his death, the Mothers say, “no one feels safe anymore.”

Today the Mothers have little hope that their children are alive and in clandestine prisons. According to Ivan Escobar, a member of El Salvador’s Human Rights Commission: “The normal process in El Salvador now is to kidnap persons, torture them, and later give them their freedom. Unfortunately this freedom is accompanied by death.” He said that the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights verified the existence of clandestine prisons in El Salvador but that as antigovernment opposition grew, these prisons proved an ineffective way of dealing with resistance.

There is little optimism that the crisis in El Salvador will end soon. A new wave of violence was touched off last November, when six leaders of the Democratic Revolutionary Front (a coalition of leftist guerrillas and non-Marxist dissidents formed earlier in the year) were kidnapped and slain. One was the leader of the front, ex-minister of agriculture and wealthy landowner, Enrique Alvarez Cordova.

In December four American missionary women were killed in El Salvador, prompting President Carter to cut off aid to the country. Not long after, Colonel Adolfo Arnoldo Majano was ousted from the ruling junta. He had supported government negotiations with dissident leaders.

Most recently leftists launched what they called their final offensive, which failed to arouse widespread popular support. The government declared martial law and claimed that Nicaraguan troops were arriving to aid the Left. The U.S. Government responded by reinstating military aid and sending U.S. military “advisors.”

The Council on Hemispheric Affairs reported that El Salvador has become the Latin American nation with the worst human rights record. Many Salvadorans compare the current crisis with the 1932 massacre, but they claim that this time the government plans to kill 250,000 people in order to stabilize the situation in the country. As one mother exclaims: “We are not only fighting for our children; now we are fighting for the survival of our people.”

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