

El Salvador: A Requiem without End

The sun beat mercilessly down on the dust-covered streets of San Salvador. At least we could find some shelter from the burning heat in the shadow of the bus shelter.

"Mariona Prison is about an hour's journey away so we should be arriving there for three o'clock but on Sundays one never knows"

María our escort, is a tall woman who now lives alone as most of her family have been killed by the military and the rest are in exile in Mexico. She never spoke very much but her eagerness and determination have made her into one of the leading members of the Committee of Mothers of the Disappeared 'Bishop Romero'. This Central American capital has got much hotter, it seems, since the earthquake last year. Five minutes in the sun had me longing for a cool drink and a dip in the sea. I was getting impatient.

"That's it now coming" said María. The colourful bus advanced slowly as it swayed back and forth over the potholes. It was packed but somehow we managed to slip in near the driver where there was at least head-room.

Our delegation from the Latin American Federation of Families of the Disappeared (FEDEFAM) had recently arrived in El Salvador and we were observing the local human rights' scene. Now we were visiting the main prison where almost one thousand male political prisoners are being held. All the other passengers were mostly women and children dressed in their Sunday best and it was evident they had the same destination as ourselves.

I was in a kind of stuporous daze by the time the scramble for the door began. We had arrived at some kind of open market.

El Salvador

People rushed to buy fruit and cakes, or some other gifts for their folks in jail. Even though the entrance was still a good walk away, our main concern now was if and how we could get into the prison. We had no arrangements made with the authorities about the visit and were advised to simply say we had come to see a Juan Perez. As it was public visiting hours there should be no problem. I was sceptical but the formula worked perfectly and it wasn't very long before we found ourselves crossing the doorway that leads into the sector where the political prisoners are held. Maria searched out a member of the prisoners' committee whose task it was to show us around and introduce us to those detainees who may wish to speak with us.

"Well, my friends, before we end our tour, I would like to show you something we are very proud of."

Juan had brought us up and down stairways into all the nooks and corners of the building showing us the cells, workshops and recreation rooms, and introducing us to men young and old from all walks of life.

"We have our legal aid office in this cell"

He lead us into a very neatly arranged office. There was a typewriter on a small table in the centre of the room which was decorated with posters and a big notice-board with clippings. A home-made filing cabinet was pushed into one corner and there were enough chairs for all four of us.

"Here are the reports we have being publishing since the office opened about a year ago."

Juan was handing us copies of different printed pamphlets.

The obvious question on my mind as I listened to their briefing us about the counseling programmes and investigations they were carrying out, was how on earth did they get this office going in a high security Salvadorean prison ! Juan eventually explained.



El Salvador

explained even before I could ask him.

"Several members of the Commission for Human Rights in El Salvador were imprisoned here last year. The irony of their arrest was that they got this office going which is now of vital importance for reporting on violations to human rights particularly torture in our country"

Juan himself was a trade-unionist and expected to be released from jail very soon. He was evidently very interested in our theme.

"You have probably met one of the members who was detained here" he continued. "His name is Herberto Ernesto Anaya and now directs the Commission's office in San Salvador"

"Yes indeed" I answered " I know Herberto very well"

I had met him during several other visits to the country and I could not but smile at the thought of he being locked up in prison. His chubby face and broad smile made him look much younger than his thirty plus years. He was always cheerful even in the most trying of situations. That is just what Herberto was capable of doing; setting up a human rights office in the very prison he was in.

All those images of my visit to Mariona Prison have been haunting me since I heard that this good friend and colleague was gunned down last week (Monday, 26th October) as he was leaving his children off at school before going to work.

Herberto's friendly appearance belied a hard-working principled man who could not be broken either by prison, torture or money. The Salvadorean government had tried all but failed.

He began working with the Commission when it was founded over ten years ago. But in the last few years, he had to assume an

El Salvador

increasing responsibility. The situation could not have been more dramatic. Marinella Garcia Villas, President of the Commission during its first years and perhaps, the most experienced worker in human rights of any South American country, was captured by the Army in early 1983, tortured brutally and killed. Many other members had already suffered the same fate. It was then the Salvadorean government thought up a new policy in human rights. "If you can't beat them, join them." Cosmetic changes were introduced in the prison system, death-squad killings were reduced and police began to use tear gas instead of bullets. Then various lawyers, clerics and military officers under official auspices banded together to form a new human rights group and very brashly adopted the identical name as the Commission. The American government poured money into this new organisation so it now boasts a string of offices across the country, with public bill-boards in most places, slots on TV and radio and of course many employees on the pay-roll. Naturally its work is to defend the army and the government rather than denounce the violations that take place.

At first it might have seemed the end of the original non-governmental Commission. Most of its members were in exile or fearful of continuing. At one moment its office staff was reduced to two.

Herberto very faithfully struggled on assuming the Presidency of the Commission. The office was moved to a new house and he built the staff up again. They were able to differentiate themselves from the new group and continued on with their work. The military saw it all happening and did not like it one bit. so they thought up a new plan.

A former activist in the movement was convinced to change sides



El Salvador

so to speak. Luz Janet Alfaro did not seem to have needed much convincing. In 1986 she began a public smear campaign that has gone on ever since. Her accusations go from supposed misappropriations of funds to operating as a front for guerilla organizations. Herberto was consequently arrested together with many others and held without charge until his release in 1987.

The Commission battled bravely on and produced an excellent report on torture which was the result of hundreds of interviews in prison. It was documented that the security forces were using over twenty different types of torture.

But this year the death threats once again appeared. At the same time things were getting out of hand even more for the government of President Napoleon Duarte. The economy was at rock-bottom and social strife was on the up-swing particularly among the thousands of victims in the earthquake who were facing the rainy season still in make-shift shacks. The relief money that had flowed into the country was gone. And worse of all the war with the revolutionary forces - the Farabundo Marti Front for Liberation (FMLN) was at a dead-lock with the rebels looking more confident all the time.

The overall crisis meant an upsurge in repression. In May the office of the Committee of Mothers was seriously damaged by a bomb attack which left two mothers gravely injured. The authorities turned a blind eye to the incident and the mothers lost their office.

Things deteriorated further as the Iran-Contra crisis slowed down the Reagan Administration in its policy towards Central America.

Then as the situation reached its lowest ebb, surprisingly there arose a new focus for peace and justice in the region

El Salvador

When the Presidents of five Central American adopted a plan for peace after their meeting in August. Despite Reagan's opposition it was largely devised as a solution for the conflict in Nicaragua. At first President Duarte of El Salvador dragged his feet at the accord knowing that it would ease the pressure on the Nicaraguan government so that the Sandinistas, his sworn enemies, would continue in power for the foreseeable future. However on closer examination he discovered that its application to El Salvador might well give him the edge over the FMLN forces that he has so desperately sought for all these years. They would be required to put down their arms, and comply with a total boycott of all foreign aid to their forces. The government would be expected to grant an amnesty for political prisoners and guarantee the free exercise of full political and civil rights..

However more recent events have shown that things did not work out as expected for President Duarte. From the onset there were many difficulties. The authorities resisted meeting the FMLN leaders but finally had to sit down with the rebel leaders. They wanted them to disarm themselves but of course the Salvadorean government does not have the strength to make them comply. President Duarte is reluctant to order any amnesty for political prisoners and they would be going back on the streets to support the guerilla struggle.

However the ruling Christian Democratic Party needed a breakthrough if it were to make a decent showing in elections that will be coming up soon. They decided to link the Amnesty Bill with the granting of immunity from prosecution to all personnel involved in human rights crimes all these years. That they felt would satisfy both extremes of political opinion in El Salvador - the left and the right.



El Salvador

As little as two or three years ago such a move would have been condemned by the international community but now those policies have been enacted in Argentina, Uruguay and Guatemala and there seems to be a general acceptance that such a measure may be necessary for the future welfare of a country.

I find the idea abhorrent and frightening. Because it means that the military can murder, torture and rob in counter-insurgency operations and get away with it.

One of the leaders of the human rights organizations in El Salvador who strongly opposed such legislation was Herberto Anaya. On Friday he gave a press conference where he called on the government to scrap that part of the Amnesty Bill. The Church also condemned the move as it meant that even the killers of Bishop Romero could go free if they are ever charged.

Three days later and Herberto was brutally assassinated. I think the reason is pretty much clear.

The Salvadorean Government once again promised exhaustive investigations and exemplary punishment for the criminals involved. But then a critical voice had been silenced forever.

The vulnerability of human rights activists is once again illustrated. Yet again we have to face the tragedy and loss of a very fine person in El Salvador.

The General Secretary of the United Nations issued a public condemnation of the killing. Latin-Americans and Salvadoreans live with so much tragedy that sometimes it is not easy to muster up hope. Oliver Stone's fine film "Salvador" is conclusive on that score. The Salvadorean Requiem continues.

Personally the only way that this and other situations will be resolved is when we have an international criminal justice system in place that could effectively prosecute those individuals who kill, maim and torture in the name or in the service of the state.