

is changing because we have to recognize that for the last years there's been a trend in which the United States is trying to support democracies in the world."

Critics of American policy in El Salvador cite the failure to end the war and the concomitant militarization of the country, along with the failing economy. President Duarte says that economic recovery cannot occur until the fighting stops. Others respond that the fighting will not stop until the people feel that they have achieved some social justice.

Jose Luis Galdez is a sociology professor at the University of El Salvador: "Nobody can tell exactly what is the right solution to the conflict. The Salvadoran people have to sit down and discuss it – the government, the FMLN, FDR,* the legal opposition, the unions – everybody that has something to say. Our country has to find a solution to its conflict, but a Salvadoran solution. First of all, we have to start by putting an end to the US meddling in our affairs. Then the Salvadorans can discuss the war problem and seek a solution for a true and just peace."

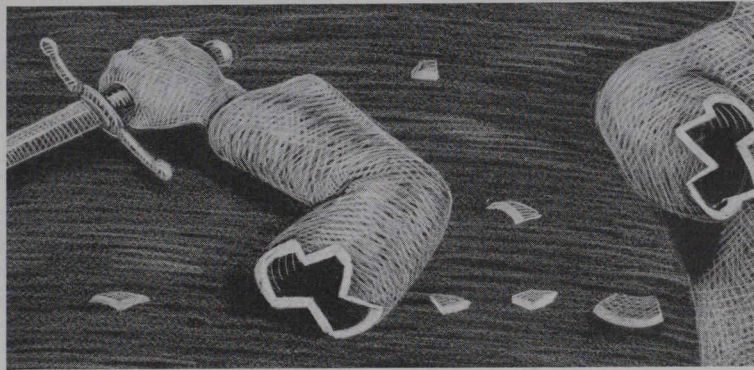
IN THE MEANTIME THE WAR SOAKS up resources and lives. The guerrillas, fewer in number than they were, are still active in wide regions of the country: Morazan, San Miguel, Usulután, La Libertad, Chalatenango . . . and Oaxapa.

Just thirty kilometres from San Salvador, Oaxapa has been the target of Operation Phoenix: an all-out aerial war against the guerrillas said to be tunneled into the sides of the volcano. In the villages just outside the target zone, people point to the patches of smoke rising from the volcano and tell us, "That's where they bombed last night." Or, "That's where the army is burning things" – dwellings, huts, whatever they find that might be useful to the enemy. The villagers are quite used to it.

From the villages inside the zone pour some of the hundreds of thousands of refugees that the war has created. In a refugee camp on the outskirts of the capital a Cana-

dian nun oversees the care and feeding of seven hundred people at a time. Sister Andrea says that the US ambassador thinks she harbors subversives, and that the army has descended on them several times in an apparent attempt to intimidate them. But having lost her patience with the soldiers one time, and literally chased them out of the camp, she has tested the limits of the government's willingness to harass her.

At the Human Rights Commission offices in San Salvador (not



the government Human Rights Commission) small children chase each other around a small, dirty courtyard amid stacks of documents and affidavits, while volunteers prepare lunch for the people who have temporarily sought refuge there. There are nine portraits on one wall, pictures of the most recent slayings or "disappeared." Another wall charts the total deaths since 1981 . . . 56,626 in all; 1,821 last year. The government admits there are still killings: casualties of the war they say. This Human Rights office says they are casualties of the army.

How many civilians have been killed by the guerrillas I ask. "We don't know of any," they reply. But this very day the newspapers carry reports of the execution of two village mayors by guerrilla forces. The existence of two human rights commissions – one of the left and one of the right – is evidence of the polarization of El Salvador.

SINCE THE ELECTION OF PRESIDENT Duarte in 1984, and the victory of his Christian Democratic Party in the legislative elections of 1985, the United States believes El Salvador is on the road to salvation, if only there is no interference in the form of aid to the

guerrillas from neighbouring Nicaragua. The US government believes that with some guidance and a lot of money, El Salvador can beat back the revolutionary forces of the left and gradually satisfy the desire for change among the people. President Duarte himself, when he isn't addressing the Chamber of Commerce, fairly boasts of his own revolutionary ideals. His heart maybe in the right place, but the problems he faces are grave and his chances of success not overwhelming.

People are tired of the war to be sure, but having come this far and paid so dearly they are not likely to give up their demands for a new social order and a radical redistribution of resources. For this to happen, Duarte will need some luck in restoring the economy and seeing to it that the people feel they are benefitting from change. He is hampered by the emphasis on military strength that the US insists on; by the intransigence of the right and the business class; by the fact that guerrilla leaders seem unwilling to settle now for anything less than a radical left-wing re-structuring of the government; by charges that his own party members are involved in corruption.

Most of all perhaps, he is hampered by a five hundred year history of colonial oppression and strife that has taught Salvadorans a lot about corruption and cheating and violence, and very little about peaceful change and democracy.

El Salvador, like the other nations of Central America, is deeply affected by what happens in Nicaragua. There too, the United States relies heavily on military action to topple the government of Daniel Ortega. But the recent scandals involving Iranian arms sales and money and arms to

the Contras have weakened the Administration's hand and may breathe new life into the peace proposals put forward by the Contadora group of nations (Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico and Panama), and more recently by the president of Costa Rica.

A DEFEAT FOR RONALD REAGAN and victory for the Sandinistas may mean that the Salvadoran guerrillas will redouble their efforts for a Nicaragua-style revolution in their own country. But it could also mean that guerrilla leaders who have given up hope that change can be had by peaceful means as long as the US is determined to call all the shots, would see an opening for talks with the government of El Salvador.

"No hay uno salvador para El Salvador," quotes President Duarte. 'El Salvador – The Saviour – has no saviour.' He hopes to put the lie to that saying. It is a beautiful country with a sad history. It has a chance now to build a future out of the embers of its troubled past. The United States has a chance to bolster its own security against a hostile southern front by judiciously promoting a third alternative to the twin pillars of communist dictatorship and right-wing tyranny that have come in this century to represent the principle choices for the people of Central America. It will be a delicate task, one not well understood by all the forces that shape American government today, and hardly noticed by the majority of American people who themselves generally share only two concerns about the region: they don't want another Viet Nam, and they don't want another Cuba. Presumably they would welcome a third option for the Third World on their doorstep. □

Further Reading

Steven Baranyi, *Peace in Central America?*, Canadian Institute for International Peace and Security, Background Paper #8, October 1986.

J. Preston, "What Duarte Won," *New York Review of Books*, 15 August, 1985.

Joseph Cirincione, ed. *Central America and the Western Alliance*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and IISS, New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985.

*The FMLN and FDR are the guerrillas' military and political organizations.