The third stage in the Continuum of Conflict is a state of *unstable peace*. This occurs when communication between parties diminishes, suspicions and tensions mount, and essentially there is nothing to guarantee peace. Rupesinghe asserts that unstable peace may occur when a government maintains power through the blatant use of coercion and repression, and outlaws any form of dissent. (Rupesinghe, 1998:61) In some circumstances, groups become increasingly isolated and disengaged. Mutual intimidation or repression of the weak by the stronger becomes more widespread. (Rupesinghe, 1998:62)

From the end of the nineteenth century, one could argue that on the surface, *stable peace* appeared to exist in El Salvador. The normalization of social exclusion and mass inequities was naturalized into the working and traditional culture, which, some historians claim, was accepted as unquestionable fact. It was part of a social order based on *hacienda terranteniente* (land owners), characterized by servile labour and a culture that openly condoned social and racial discrimination. (Torres-Rivas, 1994:12)

Normalization and naturalization of social conditions does not make them inherently valuable. One must question whether the peasant majority truly 'respected' the rule of law dictated by landowners and elites, or whether they had any other alternatives from which to choose. The historical roots of conflict were created when peasant lands were first seized for coffee planting in the late nineteenth century. (Fish, 1988: 9) Over time, as El Salvador increased its export economy, peasant land was confiscated, labour-intensive local farming was converted to mechanized-based export crops, and thousands of landless and unskilled people were left homeless with few alternatives.

Does this sound like a situation in which the majority willingly accepted their lot in life? Thus, in reality, this point in El Salvadoran history should be classified in the third stage of the Continuum, *unstable peace*. Yet, despite the unhappiness of the majority, social exclusion was normalized and institutionalized to such a degree, that there was little capacity, or visible opposition to the system.

The fourth stage in Rupesinghe's Continuum of Conflict is the *crisis-low-intensity conflict*. This crisis point occurs when rival groups or dissidents take up arms and engage in physical hostilities. The conflict is limited to a particular group or specified region. Extra-judicial killings, rebel attacks, torture and subjugation are common occurrences, but are considered 'low-intensity' because it has little impact on the country as a whole. It is the beginning of a humanitarian crisis, when private militias form, massacres occur and people begin to flee their homes. Security forces take on political power with increasing immunity, as law and order erodes. (Rupesinghe, 1998:62)