

Fighting for their future

by Stephen Mitchell

The murder last week of six Jesuit priests at the Central American University in El Salvador seems to underscore how incredibly difficult it is for someone to get a safe and complete education under the wavering guns of a jumpy military regime.

At the core of the tension is the fact that in El Salvador the ultra right-wing government of Alfredo Cristiani sees its national universities as enemy ground and perceives any activity involving students or faculty as subversive.

Between 1960 and 1979, the University of El Salvador (UES) was invaded three times. Students were tortured and killed, campus property was destroyed and the university's constitution was ripped up and replaced by an autonomy-denying 'organic law.'

In 1975, 30 students were killed when government soldiers and police attacked a peaceful demonstration at the UES Santa Anna campus.

The turmoil came to a head in 1980, when the military dictatorship and the guerilla opposition Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) clashed in a war that still rages today. Throughout the '80s, universities have taken a pummeling in El Salvador.

Here, then, is a chronological run-through of the last nine years in El Salvador, from the perspective of the academic community:

1980

On June 26, Government forces attack and occupy the University of El Salvador. Helicopters and tanks provide the aggressive edge of the raid, in which 26 students are killed. "Their only crime," says the UES rector of the murdered students, "was that they were at the university." In four months, university rector Felix Ulloa is dead as well. At the end of the year, the Archdiocese office has documented proof that 724 students were assassinated in 1980.

1980-1984

The university remains in a state of military occupation. The social science faculty building and the office of the student association are bombed beyond recognition. Lab equipment is destroyed or, reportedly, sold to the government-supported private universities that begin to pop up in the early '80s. Books are burned simply because they have a red cover.

The government launches a comprehensive propaganda campaign against the university. Failing to discover arms, bombs or any other weapons on campus, the government reports the existence of tunnels, secret passages, torture chambers, subversive electrical installations and even a clandestine cemetery. According to the UES rector, this alleged guerilla network is nothing more than an aqueduct system in the laboratories.

Amidst the rubble, however, classes continue — largely through the efforts of the embattled General Association of Salvadorean University Students (AGEUS). Solidarity groups come into formation all around the world in sup-

