

El Salvador

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Flora MacDonald (Kingston and the Islands): Mr. Speaker, for weeks now, indeed for months, our nightly newscasts and our newspapers have been filled with reports of the fighting, the brutality and the fear that characterizes El Salvador. A year ago, outsiders paid but little heed to this tiny Central American country. There were few who discussed it but many do so today, for today the world knows that El Salvador is a country in distress. It is a country whose people are locked into a class war, the great majority of whom are struggling for that kind of life which will offer them the opportunity for dignity and for hope. It is a country where fewer than 2 per cent of the population own more than half of the arable land, a country where the great bulk of the population live in abject poverty, their annual income a mere \$600. It is a country which, as we know from history, has time and again expressed its desire for a democratic government, only to have those desires frustrated when elections were either disregarded or aborted.

● (1530)

These factors ought to remind us that El Salvador is not simply a pawn in the context of the United States and the Soviet Union. It reflects the problems of Third World countries, where people are seeking the twin objectives of economic development and political stability. As such, El Salvador should remind us that we are looking not just at a small country, but at an entire region of potential instability which could encompass not only Central America but the whole of the Caribbean.

All this makes more extraordinary the comments of the Secretary of State for External Affairs (Mr. MacGuigan). In response to a question I posed to him last Tuesday, as recorded at page 7767 of *Hansard*, he said:

—I am not aware that we have any serious obligations in that part of the world, in Central America, which is not an area of traditional Canadian interest.

I would say to you, sir, that of course we have in that part of the world interests which are historic, geographic, economic and indeed moral. It is typical of this government to take such a narrow view of foreign policy. It leads to a failure to distinguish and analyse the consequences for Canada of situations like that in El Salvador. We ought to know by now that there are direct consequences for us. We need only recollect the human tragedy and the great difficulty caused by the flow of refugees from southeast Asia and the need for collective action to provide humanitarian relief to them.

Was southeast Asia also an area in which Canada had no interest? We have all the elements in El Salvador of a situation which could well produce a stream of refugees. It is estimated that already 60,000 people have fled that country to seek refuge in neighbouring states. I will be interested to see how the Secretary of State for External Affairs responds in the eventuality that an increasing number of El Salvadoreans become political refugees looking to countries such as Canada for assistance.

Then there is a broader sense in which Canada cannot remain indifferent to conflict in the western hemisphere. It has the potential to widen the rift between the United States and our European allies. It is clear, for example, that in the present situation West Germany is strongly opposed to the United States policy of injecting more arms into the conflict. I ask the minister, does the Canadian government have no interest in the potential that exists, as Vietnam did, to divide the alliance? It is obvious that we have both an interest and an obligation to explore any and all ways in which we can exercise a restraining influence, contrary to what the minister says.

I am already well on record as being opposed to military intervention by the United States in El Salvador or by any other power. The people of El Salvador are looking for a political solution to their problems, not a military one. Even members of the government of that country have said that there is already enough military equipment at the disposal of the junta. It is wrong for the United States to treat the problem as if it were solely in the context of East-West relations or to overdramatize the Soviet threat in El Salvador. There can be no doubt that some of its citizens are terrorists and insurgents and communist sympathizers, but their numbers are relatively few and their military might weak. We have only to look at the results of their recent military campaigns to see their very weakness.

We should also remember that there are extremists on the right who bear the responsibility for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of deaths and for human rights abuses. The present government, which lacks a popular basis of support and is becoming increasingly the captive of the right, had initially put into effect some social and economic reforms, but tragically all of these are now being held in abeyance. What is important for us to realize is that the great majority of the people in El Salvador lie between the extremes of right and left. Motivated to improve their conditions, they have found a response to their efforts in the support and encouragement they have received from church groups of all denominations, particularly Catholic bishops, and from non-governmental organizations from many countries.

The majority of the population in El Salvador is not looking for arms but for aid to reach its objectives. The great fear I have is that if additional military equipment and force of arms are used against them by a government which lacks credibility, they could be pushed further and further to extremes. The civil war could escalate rapidly if the right and the left factions were further armed one against the other. In that case, the strength of the large majority of people would be lost and that, above all, is what we must seek to avoid.

The government should make it plain that it believes the United States should do nothing to aggravate the situation, and neither should any other country. Until a short time ago, I would have thought the Liberal government more or less shared these views, even though the Secretary of State for External Affairs had indicated his unwillingness, as he put it, "to lead a public crusade" against United States military involvement in El Salvador.