

Salvador S P E A K S O U T

by Ellen Reynolds

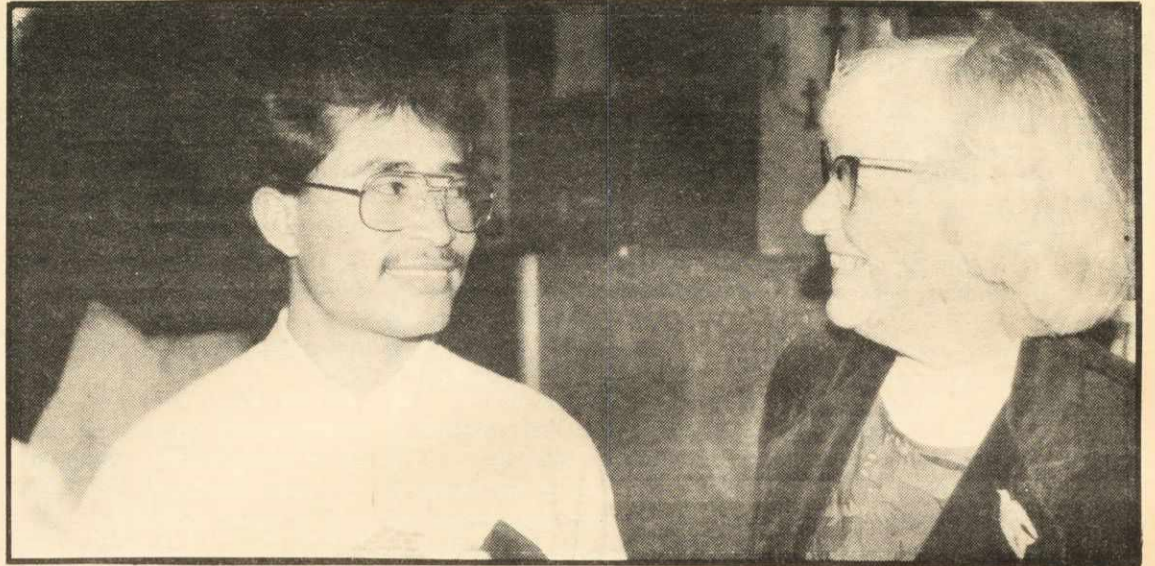
Those who work for improved human rights in El Salvador are seen by the government as "subversives" and are constantly risking their lives. One of those people is Joaquin Antonio Caceres, the information officer for the Human Rights Commission in El Salvador (CDHES), who spoke in Halifax last week as part of a tour across Canada to increase international awareness of human rights abuses in El Salvador.

Since 1979, 7 of the 8 founding members of the CDHES have disappeared or been murdered: the 8th is in exile. Last week, while Caceres was here in Nova Scotia, his co-worker and President of CDHES, H. Anaya, was assassinated while dropping his children off at school.

With the aid of a translator, Caceres described, to a large audience, his country's situation and how the CDHES is working to improve it. As a member of the United Nations Federation of Human Rights Commissions, the CDHES presents regular reports to the UN on human

rights abuses, arbitrary arrest, and torture by collecting testimonies from political prisoners. They also help identify victims of "disappearances", lobby the government for complete investigations into assassinations and disappearances, and go on tours such as this one to increase international awareness.

In Nov. 1985, accused of collaboration with the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), Caceres was arrested by the military, interrogated, and beaten. He was then transferred to Mariano Prison, where he and four other members of CDHES recorded the testimonies of the arrest and torture of political prisoners. These testimonies are documented in a 250-page report which was reprinted to the UN last spring. Caceres also showed a short video of testimonies taken secretly by the CDHES. He said that through these methods the CDHES hopes to show the world what is happening. The Government of El Salvador is aware of the existence of this video, said Caceres, but they call it "Communist propaganda". President Jose Napoleon Duarte denies any use of torture; he



Joaquin Caceres of the Human Rights Commission in El Salvador speaks with peace activist Muriel Duckworth.

admits to using "pressure", but not torture, said Caceres.

Duarte says human rights in El Salvador have improved and cites a reduction in the number of victims this year compared to '81 and '82. This reduction doesn't mean human rights have improved, said Caceres. It's just that the government is being more selective about its victims and is aware of international exposure. The repression is now more directed towards trade unions and leaders of other organizations, and methods are more sophisticated. Since torture has been criticized internationally, Caceres explained that the torturers are careful not to

leave scars, and psychological torture (direct threats or threats to one's family) is more frequent.

Caceres is skeptical about the Arias Peace Plan, a proposal for a peace settlement signed in August by the presidents of the five main Central American countries. The FMLN had already presented the government of El Salvador with their "18 Points" proposal to improve human rights and cease fighting; the proposal was completely ignored. Duarte signed the Arias Plan as an escape from international pressure, said Caceres.

After Caceres' talk, close to 100 signatures were collected by the organizers for an emergency

contact list. In the event that Caceres disappears when he returns to El Salvador, each person would be contacted and asked to write immediately to the government of El Salvador demanding his release. All members of the CDHES receive death threats and are constantly under surveillance, said Caceres.

Amnesty International, the Halifax-Dartmouth Refugee Assistance Group, the Latin American Information Group and OXFAM-DEVERIC co-sponsored Caceres' visit as part of their ongoing campaign to educate Canadians about the atrocities in El Salvador.

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