

EL SALVADOR

ISSUE: The human rights situation in El Salvador.

BACKGROUND:

Life in El Salvador--political, economic and social-- is dominated by the decade-long civil conflict between the government and the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). Per capita income has declined to the levels of the early 1960s; 60 percent of the population lives in poverty, and 30 percent cannot meet basic nutritional requirements. Education and health budgets are approximately one-third of pre-war levels in real terms, and the majority of the rural population has little access to education or health care. After improvements in the 1960s, illiteracy is again increasing: 80 percent of the rural population is illiterate. Approximately 50 percent of the population is un- or under-employed.

Serious and widespread patterns of human rights abuse in El Salvador predate the current conflict. Human rights activists and other observers in El Salvador believe the majority of death squad operations are run by military personnel, and that those groups who operate outside the military structure do so with the complicity of the armed forces. Salvadoran military officers have total impunity, no senior officer ever having been convicted for human rights violations. The November 1989 massacre of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter could mark the end of the military's immunity from civil censure. It is unlikely that this can be broken down completely as long as the armed conflict continues, since only then will it be possible to begin to reduce the pre-eminence that Salvadoran armed forces enjoy in virtually all sectors of society.

Tutela Legal figures for 1989 showed 35 cases of death-squad killings and 76 summary executions by military and security forces, a slight improvement on the corresponding numbers for 1988 (57 and 83 respectively). The number of disappearances (approx. 200) also increased. However, many of the cases occurred during and in the immediate aftermath of the FMLN offensive, and as Tutela figures were compiled in late December, it is likely that many of those classified as