

El Salvador

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CENTRAL AMERICA: EL SALVADOR

It is hoped that Members will find the following notes helpful for the debate on Tuesday, 2nd March 1982 on Central America.

<u>Contents</u>	<u>Page</u>
Introduction	1
The 1970s	2
1980	2
1981	3
The level of violence	3
Human Rights	3
Land Reform	4
U.S. Aid Policy	4
U.S. Military Involvement	5
Communist Involvement	5
The Franco-Mexican Initiative	5
The Socialist International	5
The Media	6
British Aid	6
The British Government's Attitude	7
The Elections	7

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## EL SALVADOR

### Introduction

El Salvador is the smallest state in the Central American isthmus and has the highest population density of any country in the western hemisphere: nearly 5 million people in an area a little larger than Wales.

From being a Spanish colony since 1528, El Salvador gained its independence in 1840. Until 1931 it was governed by a succession of civilian governments, backed by the military; their promised reforms never came about. In 1931-2 the collapse of the coffee price brought economic disaster, followed by a peasant uprising led by the Communist Farabundo Marti which was suppressed by the military with such brutality that political opposition was effectively stifled until the mid-1960s.

Until very recently economic and political power has been concentrated in the hands of "los catorce", originally 14 families but latterly several thousand people who dominated the agricultural and financial life of the country. These were supported by the military until the mid-1940s when a split occurred between those army officers who saw the need for economic and social reform, and others who remained aligned with the oligarchy. The reformers seized power in 1948: El Salvador was described at the time as "the only country in Latin America in which the armed forces organisation is both leading and supporting the nation along the pathway of democratic, evolutionary, social revolution" (Edwin Lieuwen, "Generals vs. Presidents: Neo-Militarism in Latin America"). This dichotomy in the military has marked El Salvadorean politics ever since.

The process of peaceful change was slow. Constitutions of 1950 and 1962 presented a democratic face to the world, but elections were rigged by the military to ensure their continuance in power. However, reforms were introduced, notably in the mid-1960s an overhaul of the banking laws so as to make badly needed credit available to small farmers. An industrial expansion had taken place in textiles, chemicals and steel. The effect was to make El Salvador the leading exporter of goods and agricultural products in Central America, and the leading member of the Central American Common Market.

The subsequent growth of an articulate middle class led to increased political awareness. The Christian Democratic Party, founded in 1960, saw its candidate Jose Napoleon Duarte elected Mayor of San Salvador in 1964, and in 1968 it won 19 of the 52 seats in the unicameral National Assembly. Also in 1968 the Salvadorean Peasant Union was formed and produced its own programme for land reform which, however, was not acceptable to the government.

The Roman Catholic Church also changed during the 1960s. Whereas it had been a monolithically conservative supporter of the landed classes, the activities of Catholic intellectuals infused with the social gospel had a radicalising effect on some priests and the student population, and the church added its voice in support of reforms.

In the face of an undeniable improvement in the social and economic structure of the country, the Salvadorean Communist Party began an internal debate on whether to wage armed revolution or to participate in the system through the electoral process. Founded in 1925, the Communist Party had been unable to recruit more than a handful of supporters since the suppression of the peasants' uprising which it had inspired in 1931-2. Increasing economic prosperity and the gradual emergence of a political opposition with the power to attract all sections of the population cut the ground from under its feet, and in 1970 the PCS split into several factions.

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Some of these groups then began a deliberate policy of destabilisation designed to provoke repression and a consequent polarisation of attitudes in the population at large. Kidnappings, terrorist attacks and random violence produced the hoped-for backlash, and the political and economic life of El Salvador has been on a downward spiral ever since.

### The 1970s

Three political events were crucial in the last decade:

1) In 1972 Duarte was the Christian Democratic candidate in the presidential election with Guillermo Ungo as his running mate on a coalition ticket. (Ungo then headed the Social Democratic National Revolutionary Movement.) They won but were deprived of office by the candidate of the right wing National Conciliation Party. Duarte was tortured by the military, and then allowed into exile. The oligarchy persuaded the Government to defer further reforms notwithstanding increasing inflation, recession and unemployment. Inevitably the pressures continued to grow.

2) In 1977 General Carlos Romero became President. Protests at the way he had been elected were suppressed, and moderate left wing leaders fled the country. Tension increased and extremist groups of left and right engaged in killings of political opponents.

3) In October 1979 President Romero was overthrown by two reform-minded soldiers, Colonels Gutierrez and Majano. They set up a five-member junta, including three civilians, and appointed a team of Ministers drawn from representatives of the military, the Christian Democratic Party, the Social Democratic Party (including Guillermo Ungo, now its leader) and various left-wing groups. They announced a programme of economic reform, whose two main features were:

- (a) the nationalisation and redistribution of all land holdings up to 500 acres; and
- (b) the nationalisation of all banks.

They also announced that elections for a constituent Assembly would be held in March 1982.

In November 1979 Duarte returned from exile.

### 1980

From the start these reforms antagonised both the extreme right, whose interests were directly prejudiced, and the extreme left for whom the success of such programmes would have removed a cause of contention through which they might achieve their own political goals. The left acted immediately to deny the junta the one condition essential to the success of its programme: time, with the result that a largely moderate and well-intentioned government has found itself caught in the crossfire between left and right. The ensuing campaign of terror and counter-terror reached a horrifying climax with the murder by rightists of Archbishop Romero, a staunch defender of human rights, in the act of celebrating the mass in March 1980.

Meanwhile the 3 civilian members of the junta and several Ministers, including Ungo, had resigned, claiming that the Government could not institute its planned reforms. They were replaced by 2 Christian Democrats, including Duarte, and one independent. The Christian Democrats had by now split, with some joining the Social Democrats in opposition. As the security

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situation deteriorated so did relations between Col. Majano, who was willing to reach an understanding with the less extreme parties of the left which had formed themselves into the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR), and the more conservative Col. Gutierrez. Col. Majano was ousted and exiled. In December 1980 Duarte was elected President with Col. Gutierrez as Vice-President and Commander of the Armed Forces.

### 1981

On 10th January the military wing of the FDR, the FMLN (the Farabundo Marti Peoples' Liberation Front) launched its "final offensive", which was, however, anticlimatic and inconclusive. The guerillas were too inexperienced to handle the considerable amounts of sophisticated weaponry supplied to them by sympathisers, and a forecasted peasant uprising failed to happen. However the "final offensive" did cause President Carter to review his Central American policy and to resume arms sales to El Salvador for the first time in four years (see below "U.S. Aid"). In March the acting Archbishop spoke out against the guerillas: he said that although the regime's record on human rights left a lot to be desired, the reforms were working and the peasants were turning against the Communists.

### The level of violence

About 8,000 people died in El Salvador in 1980. World attention focused on the outrage of the murder of Mgr Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador in March, the killing in December of three American nuns and a social worker, and the abduction from a press conference and subsequent murder of six moderate opposition leaders. According to their own published propaganda, the guerillas estimated that they were responsible for the deaths of 4,000-6,000 people in the period January 1980 - June 1981. Independent observers have drawn attention to the fact that many civilian atrocities are the result of private vendettas or common crime; bodies are then made to look as if either the guerillas or the paramilitary groups are responsible.

On 25th February 1981 Lord Carrington made a statement in which he said:-

"Her Majesty's Government note, with concern, the continuing violence inside El Salvador and the suffering and hardship this causes to the people of that country. We condemn such violence from whatever quarter. Her Majesty's Government look to the Government of El Salvador to take all possible steps to protect the Salvadorean people from violations of basic human rights and, in particular, to exercise firm control over all Government institutions and organisations."

### Human Rights

Notwithstanding the extreme difficulties facing them, the junta is attempting to maintain some degree of justice. Six National Guardsmen have been dismissed from the army as a first step towards putting them on trial for the murder of the American nuns, despite stiff opposition from the military to the investigation into the affair or any attempt to punish those suspected of the killings. The Government has also abolished President Romero's intelligence agency and moved about 1,000 men regarded as extremists out of key posts or out of the army altogether.

A resolution on human rights violations in El Salvador presented in the Third Committee of the General Assembly in December 1980 condemned the Salvadorean government but contained no reference to the excesses of the left wing. The United Kingdom's efforts to persuade

the co-sponsors to make minor amendments failed. The UK abstained but in an explanation of vote supported that part of the resolution which called for an investigation by the UN Human Rights Committee. The UK maintained a similar position in plenary on 15th December, when the vote was 70 for, 12 against with 55 abstentions. Of the other EEC countries France and Italy also abstained. The rest (including Greece) voted for the resolution.

### Land Reform

The major issue in El Salvador's recent history has undoubtedly been the concentration of land in the hands of the oligarchy. El Salvador is primarily an agricultural economy with a peasant labour force. Some 50% - 60% of the labour force is engaged in agriculture. The main cash crop is coffee with tobacco and sugar also produced on a substantial basis. According to the Financial Times (12th February 1980), prior to the reforms 2% out of the population owned 60% of the land.

Since the reforms were put in hand, 990,000 of the 3.7 million acres of agricultural land have been transferred to 210,000 formerly landless peasants - roughly 1.25 million people. Another 1,850,000 acres remain in the hands of the 120,000 small owner-operator families.

A macabre indication of the success of this programme is seen in the level of violence directed against the new peasant co-operatives by both left and right. A number of peasants benefiting from it have been killed.

### U.S. Aid Policy

Prior to the overthrow of President Romero in 1979, the US had a limited economic assistance programme and no military assistance programme. With the installation of the reform government the US substantially increased its economic aid, to enable the Salvadorean Government to combat terrorism, end violations of human rights and thus ensure stability in which to implement the planned reforms. But the murder of the nurse and the six moderate opposition leaders in November 1980 provoked such widespread revulsion that the US Government suspended its economic aid; it was resumed later when the US declared itself satisfied with the progress of a government investigation.

It is commonly thought that President Carter was determined to deny El Salvador military aid, but a document prepared by his Administration in late 1980 spelt out his intention to increase substantially US political and military involvement in El Salvador. In any case, the guerillas' "final offensive" in January 1981 caused Washington to react sharply, and for the first time in four years President Carter authorised the despatch of military equipment to El Salvador.

Following his inauguration in January 1981 President Reagan increased military assistance to El Salvador to a total of \$35.4 million in the year ending September 1980. The World Bank, the IMF and the Inter-American Development Bank all committed large sums.

When President Duarte visited Washington in September 1981 he was promised a total of \$136 million for the year, compared to \$10 million in 1979. This is still less than a quarter of the estimated \$625 million of capital which was taken out of the country in 1981 by private investors (Financial Times, 23rd October 1981). Duarte has made it

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clear that his first need is for economic aid to keep the ravaged economy afloat.

In his speech to the Organisation of American States in February 1982, President Reagan said he would be asking Congress to approve a trade and aid package of \$350 million (£192 million) for Central American and Caribbean countries, of which \$100 million would be expected to go to El Salvador. However there has been some criticism of US aid policy, stressing as it does incentives for private investment rather than Government sponsored aid directed towards rebuilding the infrastructure.

#### US Military Involvement

President Reagan has repeatedly stressed that he has no plans to send combat troops to El Salvador. There are however about 54 military advisers in the country. A NATO exercise in the Gulf of Mexico is planned for this month.

#### Communist Involvement

The US State Department issued a white paper in February 1981 showing that in the previous six months Communist sources had sent 600 tons of sophisticated weaponry to El Salvador. One of the most crucial developments was the bringing together by Castro, at a meeting in Havana in 1980, of the different Marxist-Leninist organisations into the United Revolutionary Directorate (DRU) as a precondition of Cuban assistance. Mr. Eagleburger, the Assistant Secretary of State with responsibility for European Affairs, toured European countries in February 1981 with documentary evidence of Cuban involvement in El Salvador's affairs, and arms shipments from Nicaragua. After studying the evidence, the Foreign Office produced a statement saying "This points to activities which can only be regarded as gross interference in the internal affairs of El Salvador and HMG support the Government of the United States in calling for it to end". The Prime Minister later endorsed the American view that there had been outside interference. (Hansard, 2nd March 1981, col. 19).

#### The Franco-Mexican Initiative

In August 1981 Mexico and the newly elected Socialist Government in France issued a joint statement which recognised the left-wing guerillas as "a representative political force" which should be included in negotiations aimed at finding a political solution to the conflict. Ironically this had the effect of prompting most Latin American countries to publicly endorse Duarte's government, which they had not previously done. Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Honduras, Paraguay and Venezuela issued a joint statement supporting Duarte; Costa Rica, Ecuador and Peru sent expression of support to Duarte; and Brazil joined the others in accusing France and Mexico of intervention in El Salvadorean affairs.

An offer of mediation made last month by Mexico has been ignored by the US after being welcomed by Cuba and Nicaragua.

#### The Socialist International

The Socialist International has taken a vocal line in support of the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR, composed of some eighteen formerly independent moderate and far left groups - including a Social Democratic Party and some Christian Democrats - and led by Guillermo Ungo). The

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non-communist organisations within the FDR are however not represented in the command structures of the DRU (formed in Havana, see above) or its fighting arm, the FMLN. Their role is limited to cultivating support abroad, with the aim of isolating the Salvadorean Government from the international community. Their propaganda has succeeded in persuading the German SPD (although not the Government) and the British Labour Party to issue statements in support of the FDR.

The Socialist International has not explained its standards for claiming the the FDR was "the legitimate representative of the Salvadorean people" (statement issued at the third meeting of the Socialist International's Latin American and Caribbean Committee, 28th February - 1st March 1981). The only party in the FDR which has ever contested an election is the Socialist MNR, which won 1.7% of the vote in 1971, and the movement would seem to be denying itself a chance of future legitimacy by refusing to participate in the election scheduled for later this month.

The Socialist International's calls for a negotiated solution sound somewhat hollow in the face of repeated statements from the guerillas that the Salvadorean crisis could only be solved militarily because there was no longer room for a political solution. The Economist of 25th April 1981 said that a document entitled "The Negotiations Manoeuvre" which had fallen into American hands has revealed that many of the top rebel commanders still see negotiations as a ruse for seizing power rather than as a way of bringing a conciliated peace to El Salvador.

#### The Media

The Times of 11th February 1982 reported that the American media were becoming divided about the bias of news commentary on El Salvador. As an example the Wall Street Journal is quoted: "A 'news analysis' [In another paper, presumably the New York Times] charged the Government of sowing confusion by questioning press reports 'without presenting detailed evidence to support its position'. The analysis posed the question of 'how American diplomats gather information abroad,' but not the same question about American reporters."

#### British Aid

The UK has only very minor bilateral aid commitments with El Salvador and these were initiated by the last government.

The Government has contributed £100,000 to an appeal by the International Committee of the Red Cross for displaced civilians in El Salvador and £100,000 to the UNHCR programme for refugees outside El Salvador. Aid worth about £1.6 million has also been given by the European Community, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Catholic relief agencies. Further EC aid is being considered. The British share of all EC aid is some 20%.

Some controversy surrounded reports that the Government gave £1 million to the Salvadorean Government through an Inter American Development Bank loan. This loan was approved in December 1980. Ten of the 12 Board Directors supported it. Two Directors abstained, including the one representing Britain and several other Western Members of the Bank. The British Government did not make a direct bilateral loan to El Salvador. The £1 million quoted in the Press represented a hypothetical share attributable to Britain's general contribution to the Bank's Fund for Special Operations, from which the loan was financed. Much of the money was spent on fertilisers and agricultural machinery.

## The British Government's Attitude

The British Government has consistently deplored the violence in El Salvador (see above p. 3, statement by Lord Carrington). Mr. Luce said in the House of Commons on 19th October 1981:

"HMG have repeatedly made clear their wish to see an early end to the violence in El Salvador and the attainment of a just political settlement through the holding of elections."

On 18th March 1981 Mr. Ridley said in a written answer:

"A political solution to the conflict in El Salvador is greatly to be preferred to the continuation of the present fighting, and we would of course support any realistic proposals that seemed likely to bring this about" (Hansard, 18th March, 1981, col. 127).

## The Elections

President Duarte has announced that elections will be held on 28th March. All Salvadorean political groups that accept democratic procedures are eligible to participate. The elections have been welcomed internally by a meeting of senior churchmen of all denominations and by the associations of agricultural co-operatives, and externally by the Central American Democratic Community (formed in January 1982 of El Salvador, Honduras and Costa Rica) and the Latin American Workers' Organisation CLAT. CLAT, which represents some 25 million workers throughout Latin America, voted unanimously at a recent meeting to support the elections in El Salvador, and this despite their Secretary-General being a Communist. The Organisation of American States has voted 19-0 (with Mexico abstaining) to send observers to the elections.

Mr. Luce has announced that Britain will be sending two observers to the elections, subject to the Government being satisfied about their security arrangements (Hansard, 17th February, 1982, col. 121). He gave further assurances in this connection on 25th February (Hansard, 25th February 1982, col. 458-9). This decision has been taken because:-

- 1) President Duarte is seeking to produce a legitimate government through the democratic process, even though he admits that the security situation will render that process imperfect;
- 2) representative bodies of opinion within the country support them;
- 3) as a democratic country we are not prepared to pre-judge the conduct or outcome of another country's elections;
- 4) we do not believe that the opposition groups should have the right of veto over the elections by refusing to take part. Our refusal to send observers could be claimed by them as a vindication of their position.

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- 5) the opposition argument that their candidates' lives would be endangered were they to participate, while credible also applies to all other candidates;
- 6) any democratic course of action is worth trying that might stand a chance of breaking the present cycle of violence.

In view of the Opposition's desire to support "the democratic forces in El Salvador totally and without question" (Mr. Heffer, Hansard, 5th November 1981, col. 146, and Mr. Healey, *ibid.*, col. 130), we would hope that they would also welcome President Duarte's sincere attempt to make the democratic process work.

In an effort to remove possible sources of intimidation President Duarte has announced that the Army will be confined to barracks on election day. Criticism has been made of the fact that electoral registers will not be used, but these were last drawn up in 1978 and are now completely out of date. Instead the Government-appointed Electoral Commission has recommended that voters' thumbs should be marked with indelible ink. This system proved an acceptable substitute for registers in Zimbabwe, where the same problem applied.

The main candidate of the right is ex-Major d'Aubuisson, leader of the hard-line anti-communist ARENA party.