“My name is Rigoberta Menchú...This is my testimony. I didn’t learn it from a book and I didn’t learn it alone. I’d like to stress that it’s not only my life, it’s also the testimony of my people. It’s hard for me to remember everything that’s happened to me in my life since there have been many very bad times but, yes, moments of joy as well. The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: my story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people.” Continued on page 3

Rigoberta Menchú, Guatemalan Indian
EDITORIAL

This issue of the CUSLAR newsletter contains two articles describing grassroots activism in Central America, and two articles on what might be called a North American counterpart to this grassroots activism. Part of what bonds us with the people of countries such as Costa Rica, Guatemala or El Salvador is a mutual desire for peace and justice in their lands, and our recognition of the cruel role played there by the US government and multinational businesses.

We may be struggling toward the same ends as the people of Latin America, but the nature of our struggle here in this country tends to be very different than theirs. This difference could not be more obviously portrayed than it is in the articles presented here. When our actions fail — when we fail to stave off Contra aid, or fail to increase public awareness about Chile — we are frustrated, disappointed, even grieved; but when grassroots organizations in Latin America fail to achieve their goals, the negative consequences are much more concrete; much more about life and death.1

The point of addressing this harsh contrast is not to induce guilt among North American solidarity activists, but to help keep “the big picture” in mind. Nothing is certain. We’re opposing a power structure which has almost incomprehensible resources at its disposal, and our struggle has few historical precedence; but, if we know where we stand in the struggle, we stand a better chance of knowing where to go next.

--David Glaser

1It’s important to recognize that whenever a grassroots organization in the US has succeeded in “rocking the boat”, the government has not hesitated to use extreme methods of repression.

The Committee on US-Latin American Relations (CUSLAR) is a project of the Center for Religion, Ethics and Social Policy (CRESP), based at Cornell University. We work in Ithaca and the surrounding area to promote greater understanding of Latin America and the Caribbean. We are particularly concerned with the role of the United States in influencing the social, political and economic conditions of the region.

The CUSLAR Newsletter is published bi-monthly and provides members and other concerned individuals with the opportunity to present information and analysis on topics relevant to Latin America and the Caribbean. The positions of the authors do not necessarily reflect the positions of CUSLAR as an organization. The CUSLAR Newsletter committee cooperates with authors to reach mutually acceptable editorial decisions. If you are interested in writing for the Newsletter or working on the committee, please call the CUSLAR office at (607) 255-7293. We welcome your suggestions and letters to the editors.
Continued from frontpage

So begins the story of Rigoberta Menchú as recorded by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, who, in one week-long session, carried out an exhaustive series of interviews with Rigoberta. Burgos-Debray went on to publish the interviews in book form, which in turn helped Rigoberta (and thereby “all poor Guatemalans”) to gain international recognition. [See: “Excerpts from the book I...Rigoberta Menchú”]

The book traces Rigoberta’s life: from her childhood years growing up in the highlands of Guatemala, following the traditional ways of her Indian ancestors, through her experiences as a domestic worker in Guatemala City, to her own personal “conscientization” brought on by her involvement in the Catholic church, and her participation in the Committee for Campesino Unity (CUC). [See “Current Peasant Organizations in Guatemala”]

Following the killing of her brother, father and mother in 1981 by government forces, Rigoberta made the decision to leave Guatemala. She travelled first to Mexico where she first shared her testimony with people and organizations interested in human rights. From there, she began to travel to various places around the world including Europe, where she met with Burgos-Debray and the United Nations where as a member of the United Representation of Guatemalan Opposition (RUOG) she banded together with other prominent Guatemalans to denounce Guatemalan army atrocities. [See “The United Representation of Guatemalan Opposition”]

At present, Rigoberta continues to serve as a leader-in-exile for the CUC and as a member of the RUOG. This fall she is working at the United Nations and is participating in a national tour coordinated by the Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala. As part of this tour, Rigoberta will be coming to Ithaca on Sunday December 11th. She will be speaking at 5:00 pm in the Commons Coffeehouse in Anabel Taylor Hall. The talk will be free and open to the public.

Campesino Organizations and Movements in Guatemala

The Committee for Campesino Unity (CUC): The Committee for Campesino Unity is an organization of agricultural laborers and poor peasants with land holdings too small to support their families. Many of these peasants are forced to work part of the year on large plantations that raise crops for export. Although a large majority of its membership is Indian, since its formation in 1978 the CUC has stressed the need for unity between Indians and poor Ladinos.

The CUC’s organizational task has been formidable, not only because of the 22 different Mayan dialects the Indian ethnic groups speak, but also because of the annual migrations between home villages in the rugged highlands and coastal plantations where many workers spend at least half the year. Despite these problems, and the fierce hostility of large landholders and government repression, the CUC grew.

Unable to gain a hearing for its grievances, its press conferences and meetings ignored by the media, the CUC tried an exceptional move to compel attention. A small group of members and sympathizers peacefully occupied the Spanish Embassy in January, 1980. Rigoberta Menchú’s father was one of the group. Guatemalan government forces set the building on fire, burning alive 37 people inside. Only the Spanish ambassador escaped. The
building on fire, burning alive 37 people inside. Only the Spanish ambassador escaped. The one campesino who survived his burns was later kidnapped from his hospital bed and murdered.

Immediately following this event, the CUC demonstrated its strength in the countryside by organizing a general strike on the South Coast, involving more than 75,000 workers. The strike succeeded in raising the minimum daily wage for plantation workers.

In the counterinsurgency war of 1981-82, Indian communities in the regions of major CUC strength were devastated through massacres and displacement. Although hard hit, the CUC rebuilt its organizational structures clandestinely.

The CUC officially went into exile in 1981. Since the early 1980’s it has been actively publicizing army atrocities against the Indian population before various international bodies. Rigoberta Menchú has played a large role in this work.

In the past year, the CUC has emerged from clandestinity, although for safety reasons it continues to operate secretly in the countryside. There it is one of the few organizations to work with the “population

The Guatemalan Army’s counterinsurgency campaign of the early 1980’s resulted in an estimated 300,000 refugees in Mexico and close to 700,000 displaced inside Guatemala. The sheer number of displaced people, and the public attention that these refugees bring to the situation in Guatemala has created serious problems for the Guatemalan government in terms of international prestige, internal control and pure logistics. The army responded in 1983 by creating a system of development poles aimed at resettling those displaced by the counter-insurgency war. Development poles consist of six rural geographic areas (see map) designated to become centers of economic and social reorganization. These are strategically selected areas of conflict where support for the guerrilla movement was strongest and where government violence against the civilian population has been most intensive. Development poles usually comprise several strategic hamlets, the so-called “model villages.” Approximately 60,000 civilians live in about 30 model villages.
in resistance"—Indian communities that fled army repression in 1981-82 and live in remote areas rather than leave Guatemala for exile or submit to army control in the "Development poles."

In January 1988 the CUC joined the newly formed Unity of Labor and Popular Action (UASP) coalition, which has held several large marches and called for improved conditions for all workers and the poor. It participated openly in this year's May 1st demonstration in Guatemala City under a banner proclaiming, "We want land, we want peace." On the occasion of its tenth anniversary in April it identified as the key issues facing its members the need for land, higher wages on plantations and an end to forced labor and military control in the countryside.

Movimiento Pro-Tierra: This relatively young group, like the other campesino organizations, has made landlessness its central issue. With a membership numbering in the tens of thousands, the group has gained most of its attention by actually taking over unoccupied farms in Guatemala and by organizing large marches and rallies. In addition, the group undeniably must give credit to its leader Father Andrés Girón for much of its media attention. Girón is a Catholic priest, who says he was taught his political skills by his father and grandfather, and learned to appreciate the political effectiveness and moral integrity of public marches while marching with Martin Luther King in Memphis in 1968. Girón is a controversial figure among both pro- and anti-government forces in Guatemala. While some feel threatened by the past and possible future successes of his group, others are critical of his slick rhetorical skills and possible political connections with the Cerezo government. The most serious criticisms, however, seem to come from those who have observed that if Giron's strategy for eliminating landlessness is the only one deployed in years to come, it will leave many with little more than a false hope that their situation is soon to change.

"Runjel Jaunam" Council of Ethnic Communities (CERJ): A rural, mostly indigenous group based in southern Quiché which has openly protested abuses by the civil defense patrols (see box: "civil patrols"). The group was founded July 31 of this year; their first action was a march in Guatemala city on August 17 with the presentation to the Human Rights Commission of Congress of a petition denouncing the civil patrol abuses. The petition stated that minors are forced to patrol; that people missing their shifts are threatened with death and accused of being communists or subversives, and are told that "they and their family members will be disappeared if they do not return to the patrols to give their patriotic services." The petition also refers to constant military surveillance of non-patrollers and arbitrary punishment by patrol commanders.

### Civil Patrols

One of the components of the army's counterinsurgency program are the civilian patrols, in which men living in the poles of development are obliged to guard the area from "subversives." At present some 600,000 peasants serve in the patrols working 24 hour shifts as often as once every five days.

The United Representation of the Guatemalan Opposition (RUOG)

The United Representation of the Guatemalan Opposition (RUOG) was formed in 1982 in order to inform the international

The office of La Epoca, a liberal weekly newspaper, was broken into and set on fire in early June, 1988, not long after three of its journalists were forced into exile by death threats. A right-wing death squad known as ESA, the Secret Anti-communist Army, claimed responsibility. ESA has released a list of "communist" journalists targeted for murder.

community about the situation and demands of various sectors of the Guatemalan people. A basic priority was to denounce the serious and systematic violations of the human rights and basic freedoms of Guatemalans.

The RUOG has appeared before numerous international forums, particularly those concerned with human rights, and has established contacts with many governments to keep them informed about the situation in Guatemala. Every year since 1982 the RUOG has attended meetings of the UN General Assembly and the UN Commission on Human Rights. Other bodies the RUOG has participated with have included the UN Subcommission on the Protection of Ethnic Minorities, the General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS), Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and the Movement of Non-Aligned Nations.

All of the five members of the RUOG are exiles who were forced to flee their country between 1979 and 1981 under threat of death. They are: Rigoberta Menchú, a Quiché Indian and a leader of the Committee for Campesino Unity; Dr. Rolando Castillo, former Dean of the Medical School at Guatemala's San Carlos National University; Raul Molina, former Dean of the San Carlos Engineering school; Marta Gloria de Torres, labor lawyer who formerly represented the Coca Cola workers union; and Frank LaRue, labor lawyer.

This past April, four of the RUOG members returned to Guatemala to assess the degree of Guatemala's compliance with the Central America Peace Plan and to meet with opposition leaders and others. Rigoberta Menchú and Rolando Castillo were arrested as they stepped off the plane. They were released several hours later after an international storm of protest.

The RUOG has pledged to the Guatemalan people to continue denouncing the killings, disappearances, tortures, forced relocation, and forced participation in the paramilitary civil patrols, until such practices cease completely and Guatemalans have
secured the right to peace, self-determination, free organization, work, health and education.

—Kathy Simmonds

Excerpts from the Book
I...Rigoberta Menchú

"...I did not have a childhood. I began to work when I was 8 years old, cutting coffee and cotton on the large plantations on the South Coast, where I earned 20 cents a day. My parents owned a small plot of land, but it was only enough to feed us for four months of the year...the rest of the year we had to migrate. Two of my younger brothers died on the Coast from malnutrition. This is why I decided to stay in my village and work as a catechist, to spread the gospel and to work with the community.

"When I was 14, I was hired by a local landowner to work for him in the capital city. I couldn't speak Spanish, and I couldn't read or write. He forced me to buy a new set of clothes because he said my native dress was an embarrassment. He bought the clothes and discounted 2 months from my salary. My father would visit me and find me changed. I was forced to visit with him two blocks from the house because my employers found him repulsive.....

"My father was a Christian leader. He was being persecuted because he defended the rights of a group of peasants. He was arrested and tortured. When he was released, he had to hide. We had to take him out of the public hospital out of fear for his life. The landowners had threatened him, and he could no longer go to the coast to work, but my mother, my brothers and I continued to go...In 1977 my father was arrested on trumped up charges, but by then the community was united and many protested. He was accused of being a communist. He could no longer work openly, and he joined the Committee for Campesino Unity, CUC. My entire family joined the CUC, and soon we were all being persecuted.

"The same year my younger brother, Patrocinio (age 16) was kidnapped. The Army put out propaganda saying that guerrillas were to be punished in Chajul. My mother and I went to this village, and found that the Army had surrounded it, and forced all the people to go to the town square. We were amazed to see my little brother in the group of prisoners who were being beaten as a captain read a speech to the crowd. After about three hours soldiers poured gasoline over the prisoners and set fire to them. The townspeople could not put the fire out as it was very far to the nearest water hole. My mother dared to embrace her burned son after he was killed. Many mothers did not dare. For this she had to leave the area and go to the capital city to hide...

"We continued to work organizing other peasants. In October 1979, a group of us decided to go to Congress to protest the repression the Army was carrying out in El Quiché. Many people had disappeared, men and women were being tortured and women were being raped. We were not heard. This is how we began to plan to occupy the Spanish Embassy to make ourselves heard.

"My father, who had been a Christian leader for 20 years, was burned alive in the Embassy. Soon afterwards my mother was kidnapped and tortured as my father and brother had been. When she was near her death the Army threw her under a tree and watched her day and night to see if we approached...then they took her clothes off and threw her in front of the mayor's office to see if we would claim her body. But we knew by then that we had to stay alive to continue the struggle..."
My Brothers

One by one, they fall to the cold ground,
one by one, their voices are shut,
they are old and they are young,
they are the babies of a wounded womb.

They don’t cry anymore.
The panic is silent in their hearts
because their Mother is being killed
by their own brothers
and the brothers are killing them too.
Don’t ask because there is no answer.
Voices are dead, and in the
middle of the steaming jungle
the cold and death devour
the mother-loving blood
with the light of a full moon.

—Ana I. Legrand

Ana is from Guatemala and is a student at Cornell in the School of
Agriculture and Life Sciences.

PROTESTS IN THE COSTA RICAN COUNTRYSIDE

Marta Verónica Frenkel, a Cornell graduate student in government who has worked with
the Nicaraguan Food Program and UNAG (Nicaraguan Peasant Union), recently travelled
to Costa Rica and spent four days with striking farmers in the midst of the rural crisis in June.
She was with the campesinos during their occupation of city hall in the Pacific town of Parrita,
and attended the producer-government negotiations in the Atlantic town of Guácimo. This
story represents her first-hand account of the events and is based on numerous interviews she
conducted with government officials and producers from all regions of the country.

Despite Costa Rica’s reputation as a stable democracy, free of the poverty and rural
unrest that characterize its Central American neighbors, recent strikes and blockades by
thousands of Costa Rican farmers indicate that serious tensions exist and are threatening
the tranquility of the “Switzerland of Central America.” On Tuesday June 7, 1988, in three
provinces of the country, agricultural producers’ unions, coordinated by the recently-formed
National Union of the Agricultural Sector (UNSA), launched strikes and set up roadblocks
in an effort to bring attention to their demands, which they feel have not been satisfactorily resolved through previous negotiations with the government. The farmers are demanding a revision of credit policies, higher prices for their produce, indemnization for their crop losses, recognition of land claims staked by landless squatters, and a greater ability to play a role in overall national agricultural policy-making. In more general terms, the producers oppose the government’s “agriculture of change” program, which is an effort to substitute agricultural production for domestic food consumption with production to generate export earnings, and adheres strictly to IMF policy guidelines for how Costa Rica should pay off its large and growing foreign debt. For the first time ever, small producers are joining together with large-scale farmers to confront this policy and are joining UNSA, an umbrella organization formed this past February which currently represents 55 producers’ associations.

**Arias’ Policy of “Agriculture of Change”**

IMF intervention in the Costa Rican economy has dictated that a shift be made away from traditional cropping practices toward export products in order to facilitate the repayment of the country’s mounting foreign debt. Arias’ policy of “agricultura de cambio,” or “agriculture of change,” appears to want to do just that. The idea of the policy is to reduce the high costs of ostensibly “inefficient” traditional basic grains production and to stimulate growth of agroexport commodities, particularly non-traditional exports, such as flowers, melons, macadamia nuts, and pepper. Thus, pricing policies have been designed to “disincentivize” basic grains production, and both bank credit and foreign assistance have been channeled to promoting these new export products. Most of these crops require a high level of initial investment and have production cycles from five to eight years, making it almost impossible for a small farmer to take the risk to produce them. In addition, many small farmers, who are not necessarily against producing the new products, want to continue producing at least some rice, corn, and beans to give their work a minimal assurance that their work will result in some food for their household. The government’s argument is that basic foodstuffs can be imported from the US more cheaply than they can be grown. However, as one producer remarked, “you can’t eat flowers or the dollars you might earn from them.”

**Forms of Protest**

Highway blockades which paralyze transport and adversely affect other sectors of the country’s economy have been the most common form of action taken by the protesting farmers in their efforts to pressure the government into negotiating with them. In Parrita, on the southwestern coastal plain of Costa Rica, over 1,000 small corn and beans producers blockaded the city’s main bridge for two days and then occupied city hall for four more days, subsisting on food.

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1 *Tico* is a slang word meaning Costa Rican.
and funds provided by the region's more prosperous rice farmers. In this region, mid-sized rice producers have joined forces with the smaller corn and bean farmers to protest government policies which are discouraging basic grain production and are promoting cacao and pepper production for export. Meanwhile, in Santa Cruz, in the northwestern province of Guanacaste, 800 producers, who had been violently forced off of their blockades by the rural guard, also occupied city hall while awaiting word on the upcoming negotiations with the government which were to take place in Guácimo. The latter city, located near the Atlantic coast, was the seat of the largest and most noticed protest, where 2000 producers barricaded the major highway connecting San José and the Atlantic port of Limón, effectively cutting off the east coast from the Central Valley. In this area, strikers also barricaded the railroad lines for one week, halting the shipment of bananas to the port of Limon which resulted in the loss of 10,000 boxes of bananas per day and a total loss of $1 million in valuable export earnings.

Rural Guard Responds with Repression

A member of the Costa Rican Rural guard in the Atlantic zone said early on in the strikes, "We're hoping for a settlement a lo Tico', that is, calmly." However, his desire for calm was contradicted by the strong-arm tactics used by the Guard to break up the farmers' protests. In Parrita, the guard arrested the three leaders of the local agricultural producers cooperative, COOPEPARRITA, which groups together some 100 rice growers in the region. Patricia Zamora, president of the cooperative, said, "I was unarmed but nonetheless they dragged me away roughly like some sort of common criminal. If they had requested it, I would have gladly gone with them to the police station without resistance." While on their way to an authorized meeting in city hall, cooperative members were briefly detained and harassed by members of the Rural Guard. When asked if the unarmed and peaceful producers would be allowed to pass, Mayor Hugo Ortega of the Rural Guard warned Zamora, "I have 500 canisters of tear gas and orders to use them if I have to," a threat which only heightened the tension.

In Santa Cruz in Guanacaste, the order was in fact given to use tear gas, as well as physical force, to remove the farmers from the highway and to prevent them from entering city hall. Meanwhile, a contingent of 800 rural and civil guardsmen was detached to Guápiles, one kilometer away from the barricades in Guácimo, representing an incredible mobilization in a country that supposedly has no military. As one producer from Santa Cruz argued, "why don't they use all these guardsmen to help protect our campesinos near the Nicaraguan border from the armed bandits that are robbing and terrorizing them." Although denied by the authorities, people from these northern regions argue that the armed groups are Nicaraguan counterrevolutionaries.

Negotiations Finally Held: No Results

The striking producers' goal was to force the government to recognize the importance of their concerns and to negotiate seriously with them in order to resolve the dispute. As Pedro Gaspar, another COOPEPARRITA leader said, "If Oscar Arias travels abroad in search of peaceful solutions to world conflicts, it's about time for him to focus attention on resolving the problems of his own people." For three days Arias argued that the government would not negotiate until
the Guácimo blockade was lifted. In turn, the farmers demanded that Arias himself go to Guácimo to personally request them to withdraw, as an indication of his seriousness to resolve the crisis. Finally, on June 14, the stalemate was broken when Margarita Penon de Arias, the president's wife, travelled to the Atlantic town to persuade the farmers to cooperate in settling the conflict, not with strikes and roadblocks, but in the “traditional” Costa Rican way, once again, a lo Tico. Through his wife, Arias committed himself to meet with the producers, and the blockade was lifted, with the first lady symbolically removing the first stone from the barricade. On June 15th, Arias met in San José with leaders of the National Union of the Agricultural Sector, UNSA, as representatives of the farmers in the three provinces. As a result of the meeting, government-producer commissions were established to investigate and discuss each area of concern to the producers. The commissions were to arrive at a resolution to the dispute within one week, but their efforts proved fruitless.

In recent weeks, the rural situation has become even more complicated, making possibilities for successful negotiations increasingly unlikely. On June 16 in La Virgen de Sarapiquí, 60 km. north of San José, a confrontation erupted when rural guardsmen used tear gas and physical force to dislodge landless campesinos who had occupied a large farm; during the operation, two rural guardsmen were injured and twenty squatters were arrested. In response, UNSA threatened to call off the negotiations until these people were released. In addition, Marcos Ramirez, one of the leaders of the Santa Cruz strike, was arrested and is being held under the dubious charge of kidnapping. Concurrently, numerous other organizations have begun joining or allying with UNSA, which already has brought together over 55 producers’ organizations. For example, both the sorghum and coffee growers’ associations have recently joined ranks with the other producers in UNSA; in addition, the railroad and dock workers in Limon have agreed not to assist in transporting imported rice in solidarity with UNSA’s demands. At the time of writing, UNSA’s executive council was to hold a strategizing meeting in San José to discuss their next plan of action.

Demanding Changes in Agrarian Policies

Demands made by protesting farmers are different in the varying regions but all revolve around the question of national agrarian policies. As Ulises Blanco, a campesino from Guápiles explained, in the Atlantic region, producers organized in UPAGRA, the Union of Small farmers of the Atlantic, are calling for land to be given to the landless campesinos and for land claims to be formalized according to the existing agrarian reform program. A major problem for farmers in that region is that without legal title to their plots of land, they cannot receive the credit necessary for purchasing production inputs.

On the other side of the country, on the Pacific plain, COOPEPARRITA is demanding a reevaluation of current pricing and credit policies which are currently making rice growing a losing proposition. Patricia Zamora explained that as a result of the present pricing system, “It costs us 1000 colones to produce a hundred-weight of rice which sells for 900.” The differential has to be absorbed by the producers. Furthermore, they are only entitled to financing to cover 60 percent of production costs. As a result, small farmers who cannot shoulder the difference abandon farming and are forced to
sell their land. This elimination of small and medium rice producers is a phenomenon occurring throughout the country, as the number of rice farmers in Costa Rica has dwindled from 3,200 in 1982 to only 800 today. As Luis Polinaris Vargas, executive director of the government's Rice Office, noted, "the tendency towards monopolization is a dangerous one because rice production is concentrated in a few hands, the failure of just a single producer jeopardizes the entire nation." Vargas also reluctantly conceded that the farmers have no recourse except to strike since previous promises made by the government have been broken: "They must persist in order to subsist."

In Guanacaste, members of ASPPAS, the Association of Producers of the Dry Pacific Zone, are demanding indemnization payments for crop losses from last year's drought. According to Marcos Ramírez, an ASPPAS organizer, 80 percent of corn, bean, and rice crops in the area were lost and many small farmers lost even the seeds needed for planting this year's crops. They are demanding payments from the Fondo de Contingencia, a crop insurance program set up by the Monge Administration. However, the Fondo owes hundreds of millions of colones in crop insurance payments dating back to 1985, and it has not been covering corn and rice at all. Thus, the primary demand of the farmers in this area is to resolve these difficulties.

The Costa Rican farmers are also seeking an increased role in the decision-making process for agricultural policy. "Receiving indemnization checks isn't all we want," organizer Eric Chacon explained. "We need a mechanism to participate in policy making. We are demanding a clear and coherent policy. Right now, there is no clear policy toward agriculture. Thus, policies change with the winds and the whims of foreigners." The campesino groups charge the government with paying more attention to the demands of the Internal Monetary Fund than to its own citizens.

When one looks at the policy, it seems the campesinos may have a point. Although Costa Rica is traditionally nearly self-sufficient in food production, the small farmers warn is that the country will become food-dependent if national production is allowed to nosedive under the current push to produce exports. Until now, the government has not seemed to listen, but if UNSA keeps growing and the protests continue, it may have no choice.
PERU

Economic woes threaten democracy in Peru as public disapproval of the Garcia administration runs rampant.

Recently, rumors that Peruvian President Alan Garcia was going to resign and that the military was planning a coup have stirred anxieties about whether democracy can survive in a country that is now facing its worst economic crisis of the century. The latest turmoil was triggered by the September 6th announcement of a drastic austerity plan that Garcia has started to implement in order to reduce the huge fiscal deficit that has grown to the equivalent of 16% of the gross domestic product. These measures have already proved to be economically destabilizing and thus have severely threatened the existence of the Garcia administration.

Garcia came into power in 1985 and for the first couple of years his administration enjoyed considerable popular support by bringing economic respite after many years of economic problems. He orchestrated an economic boom in the country through a radical move to limit Peru's debt payments to 10% of export earnings thereby suspending most payments on the $15.4 billion foreign debt. The purpose of this new policy was to encourage domestic growth and thus provide economic relief to Peru's population. Snubbing the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the U.S. seemed to pay off at first, as Peru experienced a growth in its gross domestic product (GDP) of 8.5% in 1986—even more than Brazil. But the economic relief that Peru enjoyed during the first couple of years of the Garcia administration proved to be short lived and the country has since plunged further into economic problems.

Garcia's support began to decline considerably last year when he nationalized the banks in an effort to halt capital flight, and ended up alienating most of the business sector. He then failed to successfully implement the takeovers and so he lost the support of the business sector without even achieving the goals of the nationalization. The business sector then began pressuring Garcia to implement stronger austerity measures, such as deeper cuts in subsidies benefiting the working class. They also wanted Garcia to reestablish good relations with the IMF to get help reducing the huge debt and to get fresh loans. It was this pressure that led Garcia to announce his austerity plan. The measures included an increase by 400% in the price of gasoline, an increase by 100-200% in the price of food, and a devaluation of the currency by 100%. This inflation put prices of products beyond the resources of most consumers since wages didn't rise proportionately. Rioting and looting began spontaneously in the central markets of Lima and other large cities as the economy shot into a sudden severe recession and as economic activity was brought almost to a complete halt.

During this crisis, Garcia didn't appear in public and by September 20th the Garcia administration had nearly fallen apart: two of Garcia's top advisors resigned, members of Congress packed their bags in anticipation of a coup, top military advisors speculated about which government posts to assume if there were a coup, and Garcia himself seriously considered stepping down. Chaotic conditions prevailed.

The situation since September has somewhat stabilized—Garcia has been able
to reassert some of his authority and the military has declared that it will not instigate a coup. Nevertheless, this economic crisis has seriously weakened the Garcia administration and has led to the deterioration of the popular support that he had once enjoyed. In a country where just a short time ago, the idea of a coup seemed inconceivable, it is now a very real possibility. Unfortunately, Peru's example will probably send a message out to other Latin American countries of the difficulty in trying to take an independent stance towards the IMF and the US.

—Veronica Bleuze


BRAZIL
Is There No Hope for Landless Peasants in Brazil?

Land wars in rural Brazil have escalated in the past few months with the apparent collapse of a governmental land reform program that was meant to distribute land to more than one million landless peasant families by 1989. During the months of June and July, about 5,000 families organized and occupied large properties in the states of Bahia, Rio Grande do Sul, and Maranhão, with the help of hundreds of Catholic priests and other sympathizers. The peasants, known as posseiros, have given up hope that the government will fulfill its promise to give them land, and have resorted to squatting as the only way to survive in a country that offers them only poverty, hunger and disease.

The land invasions caused battles with cattle ranchers that left at least 40 posseiros dead. The cattle ranchers were only trying to protect their land from "subversives.
linked with the Soviet Union," claimed a member of the Democratic Rural Union (UDR), a group formed by powerful landowners.

In October, 1985, soon after assuming the presidency of Brazil, José Sarney pledged to expropriate 100 million acres of under-used land and distribute it to 1.4 million peasants by the end of 1989. His plan would provide peasants with the opportunity to lift themselves out of their misery, as well as defuse conflicts in rural areas and reduce migration to Brazil's already overcrowded cities.

Since he made his promise, however, pressure from the UDR and inefficiency in the governmental bureaucracy have interfered with the implementation of the land reform program; although the government had planned to resettle about 675,000 families on 62 million acres by mid-1988, only 2.7 million acres had been distributed to 48,000 families by the end of July. And even in those cases in which the government had already expropriated land in the name of the landless peasants, legal challenges by landowners delayed the land transfer process and kept peasants from receiving their land.

To make things worse, the brand-new Brazilian Constitution turned out to be a great victory for the UDR. It eliminated the Land Reform Law. The government can no longer expropriate under-used land to redistribute to the landless; only land that is not used at all, or that has been used to grow illegal drugs can be taken for this purpose. In addition, the Constitution gives landowners the legal right to appeal expropriation decisions indefinitely.

In Brazil, while 56% of the cultivatable land makes up only 1.2% of rural properties (latifundios larger than 2,500 acres), about 12 million peasant families do not even own enough land to feed themselves. It is no wonder, then, that the landless, powerless peasants have no other recourse but to squat on private land. From 1985 until now, rural land disputes in Brazil, originating from land invasions, have resulted in over 700 deaths, about 200 of them this year alone. Add to that the prospect of escalating land conflicts in the future and a government that seems unwilling to help the peasants, and it is obvious that the issue cannot be ignored.

—Eduardo Gómez


Labor Unrest in Brazil

November 10th saw the worst outburst in a wave of labor unrest that has plagued Brazil since José Sarney took over the presidency. It happened in Brazil's largest steel mill, the National Steel Company in Volta Redonda, 80 miles northwest of Rio de Janeiro. About 3,000 striking workers attacked more than 800 policemen and soldiers with rocks, firebombs and iron bars. The troops tried to disperse the strikers with tear gas, clubs and gunfire. Five workers were killed, four of them shot and one beaten to death with a rifle butt.

About 18,000 workers had gone on strike on November 8th demanding higher pay and shorter hours. They were asking for reinstatement of a 26% cost-of-living adjustment retroactive to July 1987, plus additional inflation adjustments for this year. The current inflation rate in Brazil is about
1% per day, which translates to over 500% inflation yearly. The workers were also demanding a reduction in their daily working hours from 8 to 6 hours. The 3,000 workers involved in the November 10th confrontation had remained inside the plant and were refusing to leave.

After the battle, over 30,000 workers gathered in front of city hall awaiting the autopsy results of the victims, and later on approximately 10,000 joined the funeral procession of one of the slain workers.

—Eduardo Gómez

**HAITI**

Events in the hemisphere's poorest nation remain turbulent, bloody, desperate—yet hopeful. On September 17, 1988, impoverished and disgusted soldiers, corporals, and corporals of the Haitian military overthrew the brutal regime of General Henri Namphy. Namphy had been in power during all but few months since dictator Jean Claude Duvalier was forced to leave the island nation in February 1986. Namphy's regime had grown increasingly vicious during the last year: terminating voting for the new president last November with a blood bath, and then overthrowing his own choice for president, Leslie Manigat ("elected" in a farce, February 1988—for details see the CUSLAR Newsletter, Nov-Dec. 1987 and Jan-Feb 1988).

The junior officers promised a return to the liberal constitution enacted after Duvalier's fall. The leader of the Ti L'Amé (Little Army) revolt, 27 year old Sgt. Joseph Hébreux, refused to assume the position of president, stating tearfully that he lacked political experience. The soldiers then entrusted the position to General Prosper Avril. A wealthy Duvalier collaborator and top aid to Namphy, the 50 year old Avril is widely seen as politically sophisticated and is well liked by the junior officers. Many suspect he played an "inside" role in Namphy's ouster.

The rebellion has purged the military of many of its most notorious Duvalierists. General Claude Raymond, believed to be one of the organizers of the November election carnage, and General Williams Regala, Namphy's number two, have fled. Col. Jean-Claude Paul initially remained in control of the army's most brutal unit, the Dessalines Battalion. Indicted by the US on drug charges, Paul was expected to be an obstacle to any movement towards democracy until Avril was able to oust him from his command. Paul then died under mysterious circumstances—apparently from poisoning—on November 7. And Avril has looked the other way as mobs of angry citizens have attacked suspected members of the infamous Tontons Macoutes (the Duvalier's paramilitary terrorist organization) and have evicted their bosses at several state run bureaucracies.

Avril and Hébreux have worked closely since the coup. Opposition leaders, including candidates in the ill-fated November voting who have met with the two leaders, are enthusiastic about the new government. Respected leftist historian Roger Gaillard has been returned to his position as the head of the university. Anti-Duvalier political prisoner Joe Lucie has been freed. Avril has refused safe conduct out of the country for the former mayor of Port-au-Prince Col. Franck Romain, who is in hiding in the Dominican embassy. Romain has been
implicated in numerous murders, including a massacre of parishioners worshipping with liberationist priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide in September. It appears that this event was the last straw prompting the “Little Army” revolt.

Avril has promised “irreversible democracy” in Haiti. The new military leaders have taken steps to uproot the remains of the US-supported Duvalierist system by purging the military, initiating the disarming of the Tontons Macoutes, and opening avenues for public debate.

Although it appears that he continues to “march with the troops,” it is unclear whether Avril can really be trusted. It is suspected that an apparent coup attempt on October 8 was actually a ruse used to arrest and oust some of the radical “Little Army” group. Many officers are unhappy with Avril’s compromise cabinet which includes two known Duvalierists. Calls to continue reforms in the military and for a full dissolution of the Tontons Macoutes have gone apparently unheeded. Some believe that Avril has long-standing connections. In all, Avril has consolidated his power in his short time in control. Avril’s comments that the Haitian people, due to their poverty and lack of democratic experience, are not mature enough for political change, thus justifying his postponement of elections, sounds hauntingly similar to comments made by Namphy. The US continues to withhold economic aid from Avril’s government, apparently waiting to see where he stands.

One change that the people are definitely not ready for is the removal of Father Aristide by the church hierarchy. Massive protests have prevented the church from carrying out its decision to move Aristide to a Montreal parish. Aristide has been called a “prophet” and a “savior” by the masses of Haitians, including many sergeants. He has been instrumental in stirring hope and rebellion during the reigns of Duvalier and Namphy through his leadership of the grassroots Tl Legliz (Little Church) movement. Aristide’s followers claim that “without him there is no church.” the church hierarchy accuses Aristide of trying to destroy the church by directing it “towards violence and class struggle.” The liberationist priest has not won high level friends with his denunciations of Avril as a “big-time criminal” and of the church leadership as “virtual macoutes”. This division could seriously weaken the ability of the church to help resist a potential misuse of power by the new military government.

—Bob Greene

RELATIONS WITH CUBA:
LATIN AMERICA FORGES AHEAD, U.S. REMAINS STAGNANT

In August of this year, Fidel Castro, along with several other Latin American heads of state, attended the inauguration of Ecuador’s president-elect, Rodrigo Borja (see CUSLAR newsletter, Summer, 1988). This was Castro’s first trip to the South American continent since he visited President Salvador Allende of Chile in 1971. Castro’s presence at Borja’s inauguration is one of many signs that Cuba has been moving closer and closer to acceptance in the mainstream of Latin America during the past several years. It’s interesting to note that US Secretary of State, George Schultz, threatened to not attend the inauguration if Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega was invited (Ortega did not attend the ceremony, but he did take part in later meetings), but Schultz made no similar demand concerning Fidel Castro. In that particular arena the US government made no attempt to malign Cuba, but on every other front, in spite of the increased acceptance of Cuba by the rest of the world, the US has continued its hostilities toward this nation, as it has for the past three decades.

The Cuba which suffered forced isolation from its fellow Latin American countries at the hands of United States policy has become a thing of the past. In 1964 the US, using its power within the Organization of American States (OAS), succeeded in coercing all Latin American countries except Mexico to cut economic and diplomatic ties with Cuba. In the 1980’s, however, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Panama, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela (most of Latin America’s “democracies”) have all reinstated those ties. In November 1987, a summit meeting in Mexico between those same eight countries called for the readmission of Cuba into the OAS. The heads of state which met at Borja’s inauguration this past August reiterated this call. Such independent assertions by the Latin American nations could be a sign of weaker US control over the OAS, or it could be a sign of increased desperation in those countries over their social, economic, and political crises; a desperation that would drive them to risk economic or political reprisal by the US by being supportive of Cuba. In any case, it is apparent that much of Latin America thinks Cuba has an important contribution to make to the region.

This is not to suggest that the governments of Latin America are clamoring for socialism, but simply that they are looking at possible alternatives to the US-dominated capitalist system which has repeatedly frustrated their desires for fair development. All ideology aside, any move toward the unification of Latin America will strengthen the region’s ability to face its problems.

While government and popular opinions in Latin America during the past three decades were decrying the failures and flaws in the Cuban revolution, always in the context of the dominant US ideology i.e. anti-communism, Cuba was busy attending to the basic needs of its people, and forming a model of development for the Third World. In Fidel Castro’s own words, just by having reduced infant mortality from over 60 deaths per thousand to 13.2 (since 1959) our country has saved the lives of more than 300,000 children. The average lifespan, which was 55 years, has increased to nearly 75 years.... Our country is a country without illiterates. There’s not a single child without school; there’s not a single adolescent youth without school; there’s not a single citizen without
medical care; there's not a single individual who doesn't have the same opportunities that everyone else has, to study, to develop themselves...

No other Latin American head of state would dare to boast about conditions in his country as Castro has.

The rest of Latin America has waited in vain for any real, lasting change in their socio-economic status. From Kennedy’s Alliance For Progress all the way to Reagan's Caribbean Basin Initiative, US-sponsored “development” programs have failed to meet the expectations of these countries. Today they are no better off than they were three decades ago. Cuba offers an important example to the rest of Latin America, whose people share many of the same goals as the Cuban people; an example which cannot be matched by the US model of prosperity.

Aside from its role as an example, another reason that the rest of Latin America is looking toward Cuba more is that Cuba has taken a more concrete interest in the region's problems. In the 1960's Cuba had a primary interest in encouraging armed revolutionary struggles in the rest of Latin America. While it still supports these revolutions, it has expanded its agenda to address problems in different ways. There are more than 2000 Cuban health practitioners in thirty different third world countries, and 24,000 students from eighty different countries have been awarded scholarships for study in Cuba. Cuba has also been a leader in the organization of non-aligned countries.

Another example of Cuba's interest in Latin American problems is the conference it sponsored in 1986 on the Third World debt. At that conference Fidel Castro insisted that the Latin American debt is unpayable, or that in reality it has already been payed during five centuries of colonialism and imperialism. He urged the other nations to declare moratoriums on their debt payments. No Latin American government has completely followed his advice, but it is certain that Castro has influenced the world’s perception of the debt crisis.

Of course, Cuba's interests in the rest of Latin America are not purely altruistic; it has much to gain from increased social and economic relations. In the 1980's, for example, its trade with the rest of Latin America has multiplied. Cuba is anxious to normalize relations with the US and the support of its Latin American neighbors could help that cause.

With all of the changes taking place between Cuba and its sister Latin American nations, it is remarkably pathetic that US-Cuban relations remain frozen in time. Our economic embargo against Cuba has been in place since 1961, we have no diplomatic relations, and, in general, our government refuses to acknowledge Cuba as a legitimate, sovereign state; all of this nearly thirty years after the Cuban revolution, and long after the rest of the world has normalized relations with Cuba. Not only are these
policies ridiculous and immoral, but they are a failure. The Cuban revolution is not going to go away, nor will it remain isolated from the rest of the world, no matter how long our government treats it with hostility.

There are some rumblings in Washington to reestablish diplomatic and economic ties with Cuba (not from the Whitehouse, however), and the business community has also expressed interest in being allowed to enter the Cuban market; but, without pressure from US citizens, the normalization process is not likely to get far. Furthermore, without grassroots input, any such normalization process cannot be expected to pursue an agenda which will further sovereignty and economic development within Latin America. In this light, it is important for anyone interested in Latin America and its relation to the US to learn something about what Cuba does have to offer.

CUSLAR is planning to focus an entire issue of our newsletter on Cuba during spring, 1989. [See also Phillip Agee's comments on Cuba in the following article.]

—David Glaser

Sources


Christianity and Crisis. Special Issue on Cuba, the Cubans, and the U.S. vol. 48 no.15. October 24, 1988.


**PHILLIP AGEE ON THE CIA**

The following are excerpts from interviews with former CIA agent Phillip Agee, one conducted when he came to the Cornell campus on October 6, 1988 and the other from a 1975 interview done by Intercontinental Press. He is the author of *Inside the Company: CIA Diary,* published in 1975, detailing his work for the CIA. Agee's testimony shows the CIA as a strong force working against popular organizing in Latin America.

"I was recruited originally in 1956, and my career ran until early 1969. I was in training until 1960, then I went to Ecuador where I served under cover of being a diplomat until the end of 1963. From early 1964 to late 1966 I was in Uruguay, and from 1967 till early 1969 I was with the CIA in Mexico City.

"During that period I handled, directed, and initiated most of the different types of operations that the CIA undertakes in the third world. For example, you have intelligence collection. That means collecting information, processing it and getting it to the president and to the National Security Council, which is chaired by the president. The second type of activity is covert action. These are the ways that the CIA seeks to penetrate and manipulate the institutions of power. It's the way they've been trying for forty years now to write other people's histories. The institutions are governments, political parties, military and security services, trade unions, student organizations, organized religion, women's groups, professional cultural societies, and in a very big way, the public information media. This is
done through either recruitment of people who are already in these organizations, or infiltrating and controlling from inside the organization. All this work is done by local people. The CIA sits in an office in an embassy or in some places on a military base, if there happens to be one, under cover and goes out sneaking around meeting these people, giving them instructions, giving them money, receiving reports, and so forth.

"Another type of activity is paramilitary operations. This means the recruitment of irregulars; the formation of an irregular paramilitary force such as the contras for example—which are the latest—and sending them into their home country either to overthrow a government or to destabilize the economy, destabilizing politically a regime which is unwanted. There are many examples of this through the years—the contras are only the most recent.

"And you have a third type of activity which is called counterintelligence, of which the most important rubric is known as liaison operations. These are all of those activities undertaken by the CIA with local security services, or national security services of other countries. Most of all, the CIA’s role is to make these services effective. In El Salvador for example, you can be sure as you are of your own name that the CIA is working round the clock with these various security services in El Salvador which are the same as the death squads, helping them in their work to disappear tens of thousands of people. They’ve worked hand in glove with the Chilean services to institutionalize torture in that country. And the activity goes around the world.

"The most important work that I did was working with the established governments in Latin America such as ministers of treasury or of the interior. These were people who we were working with discreetly, sometimes paying salaries to because we paid salaries to presidents and vice presidents of countries. Our main purpose was to manipulate the institutions of power in Latin America in order to discredit the Cuban revolution at that time.

"When I went down to Latin America in 1960, the Cuban revolution was only about a year old since they had overthrown the military dictatorship of Batista and there was a tremendous appeal to this revolutionary process throughout Latin America at that time. My job was to use all these operations and develop new ones in order to thwart any revolutionary development in the countries in which I was assigned. This meant running spies into political parties, bugging, telephone tapping, postal intercepts, and working with the police and military services to promote political repression. In fact in my first post in Ecuador it meant provoking military coups against civilian governments, twice, once in 1961 and once in 1963. What happened in Chile in 1973 was one more of these. And they have happened in various Latin American countries thanks to CIA intervention.

"I worked in the trade union movements, with the American Institute for Free Labor Development, and with the local unions which we had established and whose
principal offices we were funding. In fact we paid all the expenses plus the publication. I also worked in student operations. This meant that every time there was a polling we would put money in to try to buy the elections and we would also put money in to promote our views through student publications. Normally these student operations were related, or we worked them through student organizations allied with conservative parties or with the right wing movement of the Catholic church. So in actual fact I worked practically across the board with police, military, governments, political parties, trade unions, student organizations, and propaganda, which meant that we paid journalists to publish our information or our material as if it were the journalists' own.”

CHILE

“...I saw a long equivocal interview with the U.S. ambassador to Chile. He was talking out of both sides of his mouth like a snake because diplomatically he could not come out strongly against Pinochet and the continuation of this regime. At the same time he started talking his hypocrisy about democracy in Chile and it is disgusting to me to see any discussion about Chile that does not give the full picture of the CIA's destabilization and provocation against the Allende government. That is, the provocations of the coup in 1973.

“In fact the work goes back to 18 years ago when Allende was elected... The CIA was up to its neck in trying to provoke a military coup. And they got going even faster after Allende had been in for two years because in the interim election (after two years) Allende’s coalition won by even a greater margin. So it meant that the people were for what was happening, in spite of all the chaos.

“Fifteen years of fascism is enough. Even for the U.S. because it is an issue which does not die among U.S. allies and among those whom the U.S. would like to influence. The U.S. ambassador of course did not say a word about the overthrow of the Allende government.

“It is evidence once again that even through the democratic process it is very hard to institute fundamental structural change in Latin America if the U.S. does not approve of it, and it never has. The only examples we have are of revolutionary governments coming to power through armed struggle. And if a government such as that of Allende is elected by the people, the U.S. doesn't give a hoot for democracy. The sooner they can get that government thrown out the better. It happened in Brazil, in Ecuador twice.”

NICARAGUA

“I followed Nicaragua very closely from before the fall of Somoza and especially afterwards. I've been there numbers of times. It's a fact that the CIA has been supporting the entire opposition in Nicaragua. Starting in 1967, people have been trying to establish a foundation within the U.S. through Congress which would give money openly to different institutions that had been subsidized and controlled by the CIA. In 1982 the National Endowment for Democracy was established under the Reagan administration and they give away several tens of millions of dollars a year to various organizations. This is supposedly open, above board money. The hierarchy of the Catholic church in Managua, that's under Cardinal Obando y Bravo, has received a lot of money. La Prensa has received a lot of money. This year $700,000 is going to the so-called democratic opposition
in Nicaragua.

"These hundreds of thousands if not millions of dollars, add that to what the CIA can give them secretly, and you have the CIA running the opposition in Nicaragua. And this was as much as confirmed two weeks ago by Jim Wright, the Speaker of the House, when he confirmed that the CIA was manipulating the internal opposition in Nicaragua in order to provoke government repression which would then be used against Nicaragua in the media around the world. And that is precisely what happened. The purpose of it is to discredit the revolution, to seek to isolate the Nicaraguan revolution, diplomatically, not just in Central America but all over the world."

CUBA

"Why do you think that the United States is extremely reluctant to reestablish relations with Cuba? It's not because of the humiliation involved. They realize the tremendous influence that the Cuban revolution has on the oppressed in the United States, such as the Blacks and the Chicanos and the Puerto Ricans. Once relations are established there are going to be thousands of people going to Cuba, and coming back having seen what the revolution has done for the Cuban people. Many of them will see what a socialist revolution can do for the United States."

A STEP TOWARDS FREEDOM IN EL SALVADOR: AN EYEWITNESS REPORT.

"The whole world is watching" is a chant I heard during the blockade and rally at the Pentagon on October 17, 1988. It would have been nice if the whole world did see our protest. It would be even better if the whole world knew what the U.S. and the Salvadoran military were doing to the people of El Salvador. The violence is escalating every day and the U.S. government is funding it every day with our tax dollars, and not enough people are aware of this.

During September and October of 1988, "soldiers massacred unarmed peasants in the village of San Francisco in San Vicente province. Security forces arrested and beat up hundreds of protesters in Santa Ana. U.S. military advisors were drawn into combat Sept. 13, when guerillas attacked El Paraíso barracks in Chalatenango Province where three U.S. army soldiers were stationed. Beginning Sept. 13 government forces launched a crackdown by attacking student demonstrations in San Salvador and Santa Ana. In the capital riot forces attacked demonstrators with guns and clubs. The next day attacks were carried out against the headquarters of the National Unity of Salvadoran Workers (UNTS) and the National Association of Agricultural Workers (ANTA)." For the last eight years the U.S. government has supported this type of violence against Salvadorans.

Three thousand people participated in the rally and blockade against the Pentagon. CUSLAR organized a car pool of eleven people, three of us participated in the illegal blockade effort to shut down the Pentagon. Several related action also took place. In one, it was reported that a group of people climbed to the top of the George Bush campaign headquarters and hung a banner saying "We don't want a killer for president;" another group of activists in Minneapolis faked copies of the Minneapolis Star Ledger with stories about El Salvador and distributed them to people's mail boxes.
throughout the city of Minneapolis. None of these actions were reported by the network news programs.

Demonstrators who refused to give their names to police when arrested were asked to use the name of Maria Teresa Tule, a Salvadoran woman who was recently denied political asylum by the U.S. government. Maria supported the use of her name for this action. It is ironic that the U.S. government will give political asylum to Russian ballet dancers for reasons of artistic freedom, but union organizers in El Salvador who are running for their life must struggle to get asylum.

David Bellinger, a veteran of the anti-Vietnam War movement, was one of many featured speakers at the action. He talked about U.S. aid to El Salvador which has been sent at a rate of two million dollars a day and exceeds the amount that was being delivered to South Vietnam at the height of the war. This aid hasn’t helped the people. Instead, it helped the Salvadoran government to build strong healthy communities, U.S. aid has helped the government kill 70,000 people and force a million people to become refugees. All this in the eight years of the Reagan administration.

David Bellinger also said that “Arena, the political party of El Salvador’s death squads, has taken control of all government branches, including the military, which explains the recent upsurge in military violence which is escalating into warlike proportions.”

At 5:30 AM the first wave of civil disobedience began; CUSLAR’s blockaders sat at the South entrance. We sat down in the road in affinity groups. I was scared, but not afraid, because I knew people who protest in El Salvador are treated with much more violence than we would be, yet they know that

they have to protest.

The first driver we had to face was a military officer. He was very stone-faced. He slowed down, but at first he wouldn’t stop. He crept forward to see if we would scatter. The demonstrators gave some ground as he crept forward, but they kept their hands on the hood yelling, “Stop! Someone is going to get hurt!” When a man threw himself out of his wheelchair and in front of the car wheels, a protest organizer/peace keeper told the driver to stop because someone was lying down in front of his wheels, the driver obeyed, reluctantly turned around and left (hopefully for good). One protester noted, “They see a badge and all of a sudden they comply.”

Another blockade was formed about 300 feet forward on this entrance, so we moved to a different entrance. At the next spot about 40 people sat down and 20 were arrested when traffic was inching towards us. The police used plastic hand cuffs and loaded people into the vans. The police here were relatively gentle: they would trip over protesters and not lose their temper.

Some of the cars and buses tried to go off the road and over the grass. At first this worked, but soon they were met with protesters ready to fall down in front of their wheels too. Eventually the cops who were arresting us set up a roadblock 250 feet in front of us which turned back all vehicles.

Later our group went to the metro entrance blockade which many pedestrian Pentagon employees use. Many people who have non-military jobs also needed to pass through our blockade and, despite our presence, most found gentle ways to get through by going through gaps in the blockade, over squatters or under people’s linked arms. Military officers were much more aggressive: they pushed at us like football blockers and many times they hurt demonstrators.
One officer shoved his elbow under a demonstrator’s chin and stretched her neck backward. She resisted him non-violently and kept her cool despite the pain that I could tell she was feeling from the redness in her face, and the anger I could tell she felt from the burning look in her eyes.

The metro station was in Arlington, Va. and not on federal property. Therefore, the police were not the federal cops we dealt with when blockading the parking lot entrances. These cops were less patient and rougher with demonstrators, possibly because they were trained for the streets instead of civil disobedience. At the metro station I saw the police using their billy-clubs to hold people’s arms behind their backs; one of them pushed a demonstrator’s face to the pavement. As the man’s face turned red, other blockaders yelled, “He can’t breathe.” The cop lifted him a second later but instead of giving him a break he tied the blockaders arms in plastic handcuffs.

Ken Chance, a demonstrator who came with the CUSLAR car pool, said, “Military personnel were stepping on and kicking protesters needlessly. I saw protesters strong-armed by police, even the protesters who were not resisting. Some people were injured, requiring stitches, and one protester was carried away in an ambulance. The acts of violence [I saw] came exclusively from police and military personnel.”

He also said that he was concerned by “...inaccurate reporting in the Cornell Daily Sun which portrayed the demonstration as ‘a violent mob who attacked police and committed acts of vandalism.’ As a participant in the rally I saw no such acts. The protesters were entirely peaceful.” The Sun depended upon wire services for their story, not the Cornell and Ithaca community who participated.

There were only 240 arrests, possibly because the Pentagon administrators giving orders to police presumed more arrests meant more press coverage. “It could be the authorities are letting us blow off some steam and trying to limit our publicity.”

We were able to close down the largest Pentagon parking lot which delayed many people getting to work and gained attention to our cause. It’s going to take more than just people sitting in roads to shut down the Pentagon for good and stop the U.S. sponsored war in Central America, but our action is a step towards freedom. The intention of the protest was to raise public awareness which would bring El Salvador back into public debate. We did receive some media coverage for our blockade, but we can’t depend on them since the military contractor Westinghouse owns radio stations and General Electric owns NBC. We have to speak through our own media on a grass-roots level to raise public consciousness as well.

—Gregg Spencewolff

2. Blockade the Pentagon. OUTRAGE. Nov. 88. pg.3.
4. OUTRAGE, Nov. 88.
The Steps to Freedom/Blockade the Pentagon Action: Time to Evaluate our Strategies?

Those who are involved in the Central America solidarity movement in the United States recognize that, although the war in El Salvador is escalating—with military activity soon to surpass the intensity of the early ’80s—the mainstream media in this country continues to pay little attention to the deteriorating situation there despite the fact that the U.S. plays an essential role in fueling the war. The U.S. government has obvious reasons for wanting to keep the public relatively uninformed about the situation there: economic support funds and military aid to El Salvador for fiscal year ’88 totalled $608 million—"the first case in U.S. foreign aid history when U.S. aid has exceeded a nation’s own contribution to its yearly budget"—at a time when death squad activity and military repression are on the rise.

With this in mind, the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) and the National Pledge of Resistance organized the October 17th “Steps to Freedom/Blockade the Pentagon” action. While it seems that the two groups were clear on their desire to get El Salvador back into the public eye (a feeling which is echoed by solidarity groups throughout the U.S.), as one who attended the demonstration and has paid close attention to media coverage of the event, I question whether the action actually furthered this goal at all. Furthermore, it strikes me that the entire tactic of civil disobedience is one which we, as political activists, need to critically evaluate with regard to its overall effectiveness. The following are some of my criticisms of the action:

To begin, from the grassroots perspective, it appeared that the CISPES/Pledge organizers set out with a poor conception of the action. An example of this, the graphic image used in publicity seemed to advertise a march, but in reality what had been planned was an action oriented towards civil disobedience. As it turned out, the vagueness in the graphic image was a reflection of a larger problem: lack of a clearly thought-out strategy. How were the organizers planning to draw attention to the situation in El Salvador? Were they hoping to draw out the masses in order to send a clear message to policy makers and war-wagers at the Pentagon that the conflict in El Salvador must end? If this in fact was a goal for the event, it was far from realized. Planning an action for a weekday automatically cuts out many working people, not to mention those who live some distance from Washington. If the goal was to “take it to the streets,” then planning the demonstration for a weekend day would have made it far more effective.

Was the goal to shut down the Pentagon, as the pre-event publicity would have had us believe? If so, why didn’t the planners come up with a more effective strategy, such as leaving cars “stalled” in the middle of entrance ramps to the complex’s parking lots and in front of Metro station entrances. This would have been much more successful in keeping employees from getting to the building than the human chains which put themselves on the roads and sidewalks. Admittedly, this observation is primarily based on one site—the south entrance to the Pentagon—where I stood most of the morning, watching as Pentagon employees escorted by Federal Police literally walked over protesters sitting on the ground
(passively—not pacifically, even verging on apathetically.) Their apparent lack of intent to block the Pentagon, indeed to stop the war in El Salvador, left me feeling demoralized. If the goal was to shut down the Pentagon for an hour, a day, forever... couldn't more effective, creative (and still non-violent) means have been devised?

Or was the goal to prove that we are not willing to stand for this policy, that we are willing to "disobey" the law in order to demonstrate our opposition to the policies by committing civil disobedience en masse? If this was the goal, again I believe the actual design of the action caused its failure. Unlike the CIA-civil disobedience action which took place in spring of 1987 in conjunction with the April 25th March for Freedom and Justice in Central America and South Africa (which brought out some 150,000 people), this action was not connected to some larger event from which it could draw a broad base of support and a fair amount of spin-off media coverage. Carried out in this isolated manner, the action failed to draw significant media attention, or to include many participants beyond a seemingly white, privileged population. Furthermore, the process of arrest that protesters were "subjected" to in this "Blockade", and other similar c.d. actions, was so sanitized—"It's like getting a speeding ticket" one organizer explained to me—that it was little more than an exercise of the privilege that few enjoy in this society. Protesters were arrested, handcuffed (with plastic cuffs), booked and released without bail in a matter of hours. Thus, the fact that the same process is systematically unjust and violent in its treatment of people of color, the poor, and others not only went unnoticed by those committing civil disobedience, but contradicts their own experience. In this sense, the possibility arises that such civil disobedience actions contribute more to maintaining the system than to challenging it.

In spite of these criticisms, I don't mean to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Civil disobedience remains a viable and important tool for all political movements. However, timing and careful planning are critical to making it an effective strategy. While we as North Americans have the difficult job of remembering that the war in Central America continues, and the even more monumental task of reminding people to the reality experienced by people there, we must, like the Salvadorans, cultivate patience and develop our planning, strategizing and organizing skills. Only with such a sense of how to move forward the struggle will we be able to succeed.

—Kathy Simmonds

1 El Salvador on Line (El Sal), November 23, 1987, No. 34, p.3.
Rigoberta Menchú
International Representative for the Guatemalan Committee for Campesino Unity

Will speak at 5 PM on Sunday, December 11
Commons Coffeehouse, Anabel Taylor Hall, Cornell
Reception to Follow

Come early to see the travelling photo exhibit:
"Granddaughters of Corn: Guatemalan Women and Repression"

Copies of Rigoberta Menchú's acclaimed autobiography will be available for sale.

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