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Committee on U.S. - Latin American Relations

Anabel Taylor Hall, Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14850

Free (donations welcome)
About This Issue...

The occasion was the First National Gathering of Madre, a North American solidarity organization which “joins hands and hearts with women and children in Central America and the Caribbean.” The event brought together women—teachers, professors, daycare providers, midwives, artists, health care professionals, poets, activists, diplomats—from across the United States and Latin America to celebrate nearly five years of working together. Successes include raising more than $1,000,000 in badly-needed hospital supplies for the Bertha Calderon Women's Hospital in Managua, connecting numerous day care centers in North America and Central America through the “twinning” program [see the article on page 19 to find out about Ithaca's own day care “twin”], and establishing a midwife exchange program in Nicaragua...All this in spite of Reagan administration-generated obstacles such as the contra war and the trade embargo [see the article on national and local efforts to lift the embargo on page 21].

Information was presented by many accomplished, ambitious, articulate women; women like Dessima Williams, former Ambassador to the OAS from Grenada; Reverend Eunices Santana, head of the Ecumenical Project for Social Investigation and Action in Puerto Rico; and Judy Fairbanks of the American Friends Service Committee, who described the effects of U.S. foreign policy on indigenous people in this country, to name a few. Yet despite the fact that these women represented different countries and that they had a wide range of individual life experiences, in all of their talks, the same issues—of the violence and poverty that women face—kept rising to the surface.

As we put together material for this issue, we found that the same themes also kept recurring [see interviews with Roxanna Carillo (p. 3), Myrna Anaya (p. 6), and article on the Madres of the Plaza de Mayo (p. 12)]. In Latin America, women—as mothers, laborers, and wives—are among the hardest hit by poverty and violence. This violence takes many forms—from overt military repression, supported by U.S. foreign policy, to the more hidden xxxx of the home.

However, although women suffer greatly from such policies, the other message that kept rising to the surface, both in the Madre National Gathering and in our newsletter work, was one of hope: that in spite of the incredible difficulties, women continue to creatively organize to overcome their hardships. In the words of Linda Fuentes, representative from the Union of Salvadoran Women, who spoke at the Madre event, this strength and ability to endure comes from the deeply-held convictions that “We are going to win!”
Latin American Feminism and Change

Roxanna Carillo, a Peruvian feminist activist, visited Cornell this spring and gave a talk, in conjunction with Charlotte Bunch, a feminist historian. The two discussed their work and their observations of Latin American and South Asian women working for change in their communities. The following is an excerpt of an interview by Mary Jo Dudley with the two of them.

RC It's not the case that feminism in Latin America started in the eighties. I think the media and news agencies in the western industrialized countries sometimes tend to portray feminism as a western phenomenon, and that feminism was only happening in the northern countries. I think that, first of all, feminism appeared in Peru, my country, in other Latin American countries, and in other third world countries way back in the first wave of feminism, and continuing in this second wave we've been having ever since the 70's, the same time it emerged in the US and Europe. Sometimes this is something that is not recorded, it's not talked about, and even feminists here claim to see the development of feminism in the third world is just within the past 5 years and I think that is not an accurate picture.

CB Would you say are some of the major concerns of the groups today?

RC I want to say, first of all, in talking about feminism in Latin America particularly, that these developments have taken place in the creation of alternative institutions. In fact, I prepared a directory, a publication co-sponsored between my organization, the women's center "Centro de la Mujer Peruana Flora Tristan" in Lima Peru, and the international Women's Center based in New York. We put together a book in which we recorded information on almost 130 women's groups, women's centers, women's organizations, that were doing feminist work - or work claimed to be feminist - in different issues. Now, on some of the issues that we've been doing organizing, and I will speak mainly from my experience in Flora Tristan, I think are somewhat connected to the implications for a global feminist understanding. The organizing has increasingly grown through the 70's and even more in the 80's, around the idea of comedores populares.

CB Would you translate what the words mean?

RC Oh sure, comedores populares are popular kitchens, popular dining rooms, popular restaurants. Community soup kitchens could be another way of bringing the idea across. This project started with women in extreme poverty situations in the slums, in the barrios, in the shantytowns around
major cities in Latin America. In the case of Peru that meant in order to cope with the shortage of money to feed the families in which the women played the key role, women came together and decided to set up these comedores so that they could feed their families. A group of say 20, 30, or 40 women sometimes come together. They form a small non-profit organization and then they set up cooking facilities so in so doing they not only break the domestic isolation of each individual woman, working in her own house, doing her domestic work to feed their families, but they also are able to really bring down the cost of feeding their families from buying food at wholesale prices. They can feed their children with a better nutritional quality. These women learn about nutrition, what is in season, and they shop together and share collectively the task of running these cooperative dining rooms.

Another phenomenon brought about by the comedores populares is that when women come together and start working around a specific project, they begin to look at other issues as well—other areas in which they experience oppression. For instance, the issue of domestic violence has been pushed to the forefront of public consciousness. The women sometimes have to cope with some members of the group who don’t show up at the comedor, so they go to find out and it turns out that the woman has been beaten and was embarrassed or ashamed or was badly hurt such that she would not talk about it. These groups also play a supportive role for victims of domestic violence and then try to take some public action. These actions are very political, demanding a response from the authorities and from the community. New issues have really started to come out.

CB. I was thinking of an example of one of the actions that some of the women took in Peru around domestic violence. In shantytowns they were trying to think of how they could stop some of this violence. And of course they realized that they couldn’t call in the police because the police are not really available to the women in such communities. Each woman bought a whistle and they decided whenever there was a woman being beaten, if she herself had access to the whistle or her neighbor heard the
beating–because we’re talking about houses that are very close together—the woman would start to blow the whistle and then all the women in the community would start to blow their whistles and to make this noise which would bring everyone outside of their houses and would bring attention to this problem as a community problem, and would bring to light this issue. The recognition that violence against women as a public issue has been very important to women in the United States, especially around domestic violence. We have public responsibility for the violence against individual women— it’s not just a matter of private lives—and if someone, one of your neighbors is being beaten, we as women have to find solutions to bring this to public awareness. We may not live in houses close enough to blow whistles, but we certainly know, often we know when a woman is being beaten and we need to stop being ashamed and feeling that it is our own fault and to develop means of communication, of bringing this out to the public, of taking action that’s not only around the law, although that’s also an important area for women in domestic violence, but that’s also about how much we as a community will accept, so that we start to say its no longer tolerable, in any of our communities, whether it’s in Ithaca, NY or a shantytown in Lima Peru, or in India where women are doing a similar kind of action—of bringing shame on their neighbors and saying (not on the women) but calling attention to this problem and saying it’s no longer something that should be kept silent and allowed to go on. We’ve seen similar organizing, as I’ve mentioned, among women in India, in particular women in India who are calling attention to the burning of wives. It is not just a matter of letting it happen, it’s a matter of saying all of these areas of violence against women must become public, and I think it’s something women have seen internationally as major issues that we all connect to and we can take a lot of encouragement from these women.

RC. Absolutely, I think that if we really start to pay attention to what creative solutions women are bringing into the public sphere, then we are really trying to start looking—even at development—from a different perspective. Instead of designing projects from agencies, from UN organizations, from governments that are designed from the top-down we could turn that organization upside down and see what women are seeing as their main problems and what kind of solutions they are bringing out, then really we can start seeing some possibilities for social change coming from the grassroots perspective, which I think will really be an enormous change in the way we see possible solutions.
INTERVIEW WITH MIRNA PERLA DE ANAYA

INTRODUCTION:
On October 26, 1987, Herbert Ernesto Anaya Sanabria, the only surviving founding member of the Non-Governmental Human Rights Commission of El Salvador (CDHES, founded in 1978 to investigate and document human rights violations), was assassinated (1). He was shot at 6:30 a.m. in front of his home, preparing to take his children to school. He was the second president of the commission to be murdered. His death occurred four days after he had appeared at a press conference to protest a government-sponsored amnesty for political prisoners which would include Army personnel responsible for crimes against the civilian population. In May of 1986, Anaya was captured, tortured, and held in prison for ten months. During this time, he and other political prisoners collected information for a report detailing the methods of torture used by military and police officers. The government did not want this kind of information circulating to the international community. At the time of his murder he was preparing this report on political prisoners in El Salvador.

Public response to the murder was dramatic: On October 28 thousands of people declared a "National Day of Indignation," carrying Anaya's coffin to sites around San Salvador, including the Armed Forces High Command. A four-day wake was held by trade unionists, students and human rights workers, including a night-long vigil at the U.S. Embassy. The FMLN (Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front) organized a successful three-day nationwide traffic stoppage in protest November 2-5, which was 100% successful in the capital. The General Assembly of the United Nations denounced the killing (2).

On January 5, 1988, President Duarte accused Salvadoran rebels of the murder (3). A captured student, 19-year old Jorge Alberto Miranda, was given a large sum of money and threatened with death and the deaths of his family members if he didn’t "confess." Mirna Perla de Anaya, 33-year old lawyer, judge and law professor, mother of five and wife of Herbert Anaya, recently spoke about her husband’s case at the Northeast Regional Sanctuary Meeting held in Wayne, PA April 22 and 23, 1988. The following is an edited version of an interview conducted at this meeting.

Q. Why did you leave El Salvador and do you intend to remain outside El Salvador?

I left El Salvador for two reasons: first, I wanted to let some time pass so that my children could recover. If I’d stayed there, they could have put me in prison and accused me of killing my own husband, or just killed me to get rid of me. Then the idea I had was to present my testimony to the United Nations and in the U.S. Congress and to all the people in the world. I
want to return to work with the non-governmental human rights commission. I expected to be in Toronto for a year, but now the Commission needs a representative to CODENCO, the general office for human rights in Central America. I will probably be the coordinator of this organization and I'll probably be there for two years. Doing the work I do, I'm not safe anywhere in the world. Letelier (4), for example, was killed here in the U.S. But this is the kind of work that is really necessary for us to do, and that's what counts. The example of Archbishop Romero (5) has taught us that if the people who work for such a cause are killed, they never really die.

Q. Did the children understand the reason that their father died? Does it give them strength to know that he died for such a good reason?

My son, Rafael, who is seven years old, was present when my husband was captured in May of 1986. He was right there in the middle of the whole situation. He screamed, "They stole my dad!" He was really really scared. My children asked me for an explanation, what was happening. At that point they didn't know anything about the kind of work their father was doing. They confronted that hard reality in a very violent way. But then they visited the prison and they met some of the kind of people my husband defended, and for whose cause he had been taken prisoner. They saw that these were good people, and most of them had been accused unjustly of being part of the guerilla movement. In that jail they even met a boy who'd been accused of being a guerilla. He was 13 years old, and he was accused because he was found in a conflict zone. There were also old people in jail. Then they understood that their father was working to defend the poor. My son Rafael would tell me, "No mom, let's not defend the poor. I'm really scared." After his father was killed, he would say, "When I grow up, I'm going to defend the poor, and I'm going to be taken prisoner, and then they're going to kill me."

My children were interviewed on television in El Salvador, and they told the journalist that when they grow up, they are going to work for human rights. And one of the girls said she was going to be a journalist. The youngest girl, Edith, who is five years old—when they asked her why her father had been killed, she said it was because he worked for human rights. And then the journalist asked her, "what is that?" my sister told me, "I thought she wasn't going to say anything," but she [Edith] said, "it's to defend the poor."

Q. Describe the role of the non-governmental human rights commission.

A. The commission was started in 1978,
in April, when various lawyers aware of the human rights situation in El Salvador decided to establish a real structure to defend the basic rights of Salvadorans, such as the right to live, freedom of expression, and freedom of association. In this sense, the commission continues to promote human rights inside and outside of El Salvador, educating people about their rights and letting them know that they have in their hands the power to defend their own human rights. This task is very difficult to accomplish, and thanks to the fact that the commission has continued to inform and educate the people, it has had to suffer from the repression just as much as the people have. We have had various people among the members of the commission assassinated, four members. Two of them were presidents.

Right now the commission is taking care of the denunciations and helping the survivors of the assassinated or of the disappeared [their families and loved ones]; it is promoting the rights of the Salvadorans and encouraging them to denounce the violations [of human rights]; it is assisting the population psychologically, medically, legally, spiritually. I initiated the legal assistance in May 1987 when I created the Department of Legal Assistance to Political Prisoners and to the Families of the Assassinated and the Disappeared. It is
true that you can work with the political prisoners, but it's very hard to assist them in El Salvador. There is no defense for them or for the disappeared. The families have problems when someone close to them disappears: maybe this person is the head of the household. They cannot prove that the husband or the son has died, and so they cannot even claim an indemnity, nor can they claim life insurance that would allow them to pay some of their expenses, both normal expenses and those incurred because of this particular situation.

The psychological assistance is administered by two psychologists in the commission who assist the victims of torture and their children, as well as the children and wives of the disappeared, or anyone in the nuclear family that is affected by an assassination, torture, or illegal capture. In my personal case, when my husband was captured (in May 1986), children would tell my children that their father was captured because he was the leader of the thieves. And this is something that deeply affects a kid. This is something we have tried to deal with.

Through a program sponsored by the United Nations, we are maintaining a psychological clinic. Right now we don't have a medical clinic because we don't have enough funds, but we are trying to raise some money to set up a clinic in our office in addition to the psychological clinic.

But in general the main activities of the Commission have been denunciations, the public denunciations through comunicados or through press conferences. From May on, we have been bringing to court the victims of the repression. Now we knew that the courts did not function in cases like this, and we knew that no judge has the power to judge a member of the military for assassinations or disappearances. I myself presented Roberto Perez to the General Court of the Republic. He had been captured and forced to sign some legal documents that put some land he had owned into the hands of the military. Colonel Montano was involved in this situation, and now he is in charge of the Usulutan forces. We took the victims of military operations, the families of the assassinated, and even the victims of random attacks on the civil population to court. These actions were taken by military soldiers. We took all the information and all the evidence, which revealed many colonels to be responsible for these actions. For example, in May of last year, three labor union organizers were disappeared. There was evidence that they were detained in the First Infantry Brigade military station of Santa Ana. They never reappeared. The mothers of these three even took control of the cathedral and participated in a series of demonstrations after they had exhausted all the legal channels available to them. But their sons never reappeared. Besides the denunciation, the commission was taking care of their legal action, at which we presented our witnesses against the military and the evidence of human rights violations. This was one of the motivating factors behind the government's decision to assassinate my husband. He was generally the one who presented the witness before the General Court of the Republic. He was the one who appeared at press conferences, pre-
¿Qué sos Nicaragua?

¿Qué sos
sino dolor y polvo y gritos en la tarde,
-"gritos de mujeres, como de parto"-?

Que sos
sino puño crispado y bala en boca?

¿Qué sos, Nicaragua para dolerme tanto?

Y van meses, hijita

que no te veo.
Meses en que mi calor
no ha arrullado tu sueño.
Meses en que solo
hemos hablado por teléfono
-larga distancia, hay que hablar aprisa-
¿Cómo explicarte, mi amor,
la revolucion a los dos años y medio?

¿Cómo decirte: Las cárcel están llenas de gente,
en las montañas el dolor arrasa poblados enteros
y hay que otros niños que no escucharán ya la voz de sus madres?
¿Cómo explicarte que, a veces,
es necesario partir
porque el cerco se cierra
y tenés que dejar tu patria, tu casa, tus hijos
hasta quien sabe cuando
(pero siempre con la fe en la victoria)
¿Cómo explicarte que te estamos haciendo un país nuevo?
¿Cómo explicarte esta guerra contra el dolor,
la muerte, la injusticia?
¿Cómo explicarte tantas,
pero tantas cosas,
mi muchachita...?
Giaconda Belli

What are you Nicaragua?
What are you
but aches and dust and cries in the evening
"cries of women, like pangs of birth"?
What are you
but clenched fist and a bullet in the mouth?
What are you
to make me ache so much?

It's Been Months, My daughter

since I last saw you.
Months in which my warmth
has not lulled your sleep.
Months in which we've only
talked by phone
-long distance, you have to talk fast-
How can I explain the revolution to you,
my love, when you're only two and a half years old?
How can I tell you: the jails are full of people,
in the mountains the pain razes whole towns
and there are other children who will never hear their mother's voice
again?

How can I explain to you that sometimes
it's necessary to go away
because the siege is closing in
and you must leave behind your country, your home, your children
until who knows when
(but always with faith in victory)
How can I explain to you this war against pain
against death and injustice?
How can I explain so many,
so many things.
State sponsored "disappearances" of individuals have been widely practiced throughout Latin America since the 1970's as a means of disorganizing and silencing opposition groups. While a host of military and paramilitary groups—many of whose officers received their training in United States military schools—have carried out the disappearances, very few have ever been held accountable for their actions.

Disappearances are among the most abhorrent of human rights violations. They cause enormous amounts of suffering and distress to the victims who are abducted, tortured, detained for indeterminate amounts of time without trial and deprived of all contact with the outside world. They also victimize the families as they are unable determine whether their loved ones are still alive and, if so, their whereabouts and under what conditions they are being held. Even if the family members conclude after many years that the "disappeared" person is dead, they have no body to bury and can never complete the mourning process.

In Argentina, Chile, Peru, Guatemala, Paraguay and El Salvador, groups of the mothers and families of disappeared people have organized to combat the injustice and impunity of the military and civilian governments which are directly or indirectly guilty of human rights violations. The systematic disappearances, which are intended to terrify the opposition into submission, often have had the opposite effect. Feeling that they had nothing left to lose emboldened many mothers of the disappeared to organize and take to the streets in protest.

Although the number of disappearances has declined in Latin America, the problem remains grave in several countries. In Peru, for example, since the imposition of a State of Emergency in 1982, arbitrary arrests, disappearances and extra-judicial executions by the security forces have become almost daily occurrences [see the Inter-Church Com-
mittee on Human Rights in Latin America's newsletters for 1987 and 1988). Disappearances also continue in the "democracies" of Guatemala and El Salvador, but summary execution is more the rule there. Few if any political prisoners exist in Guatemala.

The Argentine experience from 1976-1983, in which up to thirty thousand people (cited by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo) were disappeared — most of whom were students and blue collar workers in unions — stands as one of the grossest examples of state terrorism in contemporary history. Armed with the pseudo-fascist theory called the Doctrine of National Security (made in the U.S.A.), which holds that the "Christian" forces of the West are locked in a permanent struggle with Communism, the military sought to root out all left-wing thought. The enemy — the infamous "subversives" — came to mean anyone who opposed or thought differently from the military. As such, they would have to be physically eliminated in order to save Argentina.

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, now in their eleventh year of struggle, are world renowned for their human rights activism which helped topple that dictatorship. They share certain fundamental demands with mothers groups in other countries: Among these, they seek official information about what happened to their children and why; freedom for all remaining political prisoners; trials and punishment for the guilty; restitution of children of the disappeared to their rightful families; and economic reparations for those who were robbed.

The following articles present two perspectives on this issue. In the first, several of the original fourteen Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo recount how their struggle took shape. The second is a victim's testimony of her senseless and brutal detention. Although the detention took place in Mexico in 1979, her account is typical of what befalls many people when they are disappeared. The method of her abduction, interrogation and torture closely parallel accounts from Argentina, Uruguay and Chile. (See Nunca Mas: The Report of the National Commission on the Disappeared, Buenos Aires, 1985; Amnesty International's Yearbooks; and the USLÁ Reporter, published by the U.S. Committee for Justice to Latin American Political Prisoners).

Madres de Plaza de Mayo: Mobilized Against Genocide

We the mothers who have had to suffer the abduction and disappearance of our children during the military dictatorship are proud today — despite our intense pain — of those young people who
signalled and denounced the injustice. We met each other in various places in the months following the coup. Usually we would seek our children in pairs and we kept running into the same faces [of other Mothers] making the rounds from the command posts to the court houses and churches. Each day we would meet another mother.

Most frequently we went to the bishops believing that to be the best course of action. That was how the vicars, such as Marina and Gracelli, the ones most visited, took advantage of their positions and our exceptional confidence in them not by helping us, but by extracting information from us that they used to support the dictatorship.

One day, while talking amongst ourselves in the waiting room of Gracelli's office, Azucena [Villaflor, founder of the Mothers of the Plaza] said, "Continuing to come here makes no sense. What are we doing here if we can't get anything out of it? Why don't we go to the Plaza de Mayo, prepare a letter for the President and when there are enough of us we will cross to the government house and ask him what happened with our children."

So on Saturday April 30, 1977 at 11 a.m. fourteen mothers gathered in the Plaza and prepared a petition for an audience with the dictator of the junta. On that first day nobody was in the Plaza and, because one of our intentions was to make the public aware of the horrors which were occurring in the country now that the media were saying nothing and the only ones who knew were the victims' families or people who had witnessed a crime, we decided to meet in the plaza the following Friday.

Before we departed, Dora Penelas asked, "Why on Friday? Fridays are days of bad luck and we already have enough of that. Why not Thursday?" So we left it that we would meet the following Thursday at 3 p.m. Dora has died since then and we still mourn her in our Thursday meetings.

In our second meeting, this time with
more people, we discussed the letter for
the President and each one of us related
the vivid experiences we had in
searching for our children. The mothers
who came from La Plata [the capital of
the Province of Buenos Aires] shared the
results of the “door to door, house by
house” campaign they were undertaking
in that city and we began to realize the
enormity of what was taking place.
Azucena said we had to continue coming
to the Plaza as a way of getting to know
one another and drawing ourselves to-
gether. This is what we proposed to all
the Mothers we met so that they would
come.

In the first stage we didn’t march.
We would sit on a park bench and bring
suggestions about where we should go
and we would tell one another what we
had done during the week. So it was a
kind of therapy. On this bench which
was the meeting place for those who
came for the first time, we distributed
our initial organizational assignments,
primarily to attract new Mothers. We
would go from the government house to
the Ministry of the Interior to the
Bishop’s office, the Police Department,
and the courts and when we would see
relatives [of the disappeared] in the hall-
ways—who we would recognize by their
aggrieved and desperate faces—making
inquiries after their loved ones, we would
approach them and inform them of our
Thursday meetings in the Plaza.

This constant effort brought many
Mothers into the organization. Only the
mothers had the time necessary to
search for our children. the men could
not take the whole day off from work, nor
could they—save for a few—overcome
their fear the way we mothers did, a vital
fact that has demonstrated the true sig-
nificance of the woman in this struggle.

The weeks passed and the response
to our letter never came, but we arranged
a compromise: we would return to the
Plaza every Thursday until they listened
to us.

Finally the day arrived and the door
of the office of the genocidal [Minister of
the Interior] Harguindeguy opened.
Azucena and two other Mothers took
part in that hypocritical reception where
they suffered the arrogance and cinicism
of the armed forces expressed in these
terms: “Your sons probably ran off with
some girl or they left the country.”

Our response was clear and decisive.
We assured him that even though terror
ravaged the country, we were deter-
mined not to abandon the Plaza until our
children were returned to us alive and
well. The coward did not realize the
seriousness of our statement. His reply
was the same as that of the police: he
"invited" us not to remain together around the park bench, because though we were knitting and talking amongst ourselves, because there were sixty or seventy Mothers, "it was noted that we were creating problems." They changed their invitation to an order and forced us to leave.

As we ran they struck us and threatened us with their machine guns. We began marching around the periphery of the Plaza and ignored us. We sought to regain the center of the Plaza, but the police did not let us. After many failed attempts, in June we began marching around the statue of Belgrano in a nearby plaza.

In our search for new Mothers we encountered various cases. There was the Mother who we sought many times at her house who says today if she had known what was happening her attitude would have been different. Another Mother was convinced to come to the Plaza by a person she could never identify. In that way many people anonymously collaborated with us and today several Mothers would like to know who it was that initially inspired them to come to the Plaza. There also were Mothers with disappeared children or family members who asked us to come to their homes and had us spied upon or followed. They were families of members of the police or military. But on the whole, most Mothers we contacted joined us and tried to keep us from leaving because they wanted to know everything we could tell them.

That is how we began strengthening our organization to combat the idea held by some Mothers that some "friend in the military or church would return their child to them."

In the first stage when our primary motivation was searching for our own children, we Mothers were certain we would find them. We thought it was only a question of days or weeks, and by organizing ourselves to reclaim them they would appear. By no stretch of the imagination did we believe we would not find them.

Whenever we saw each other we would comment about the political activities of our children. But we could not conceive that for struggling for justice and freedom they would make them disappear. It was incredible to us. Although prior to their abductions, our sons and daughters themselves had recounted and warned us of the atrocities the military was committing, we believed they simply were exaggerating. Why would they make them disappear? What would
induce them to take a twelve-year-old boy?

Soon they would return home

Because of our disbelief, we would walk around the entire day with a bag full of their clothes, handkerchiefs and medicine, certain that in one of the many places we visited on our rounds we were going to find them and soon they would be home. Whenever we received word that some jail or police station had lists of people being held there, a group of Mothers would be at the door by six a.m. to find out the names, convinced that one of our children would figure among them.

But the hours passed and no one ever wanted to attend us. Many times, in order to get some attention we would sit in the street and cut off the flow of traffic. After pushing us around and arguing with us, never having formally met us, they would call us by our family names and admit us inside. Other times they would let us in but would not attend us until, tired of waiting, we would begin chanting: “We want our children,” “Murderers,” “Cowards.” Eventually somebody, usually a low ranking soldier, would come to attend us. But the results were always the same: no such list existed and nobody was being held there.

This continual searching for our children without success made us realize that finding them would not be as easy as we had believed. Each day we gained a greater understanding of the problem until we realized it was a political problem that could only be solved politically. A long time passed as we learned that praying, pleading or relying on the effectiveness of the Bishop’s intercession was not an effective means of finding our children.

They laughed at our letters

At the time we were unaware that the words of consolation and submission we continually received from the church served no purpose in the search for our children; the church used them instead to deceive us into believing it supported our cause. We wrote thousands of pleading letters that never were answered. Today we are certain they laughed at those letters. They were very dishonest people who would only tell us that we “should have patience, soon everything would change.”

The same thing happened to the other thousands of letters we sent to judges, the military and the civilian administrators begging for the return of our children. We all had some friend or relative to turn to for help, but as we discovered, they were also laughing at us. They all were accomplices. Nevertheless, we grew stronger as a result.

Moreover, many Mothers were swindled. In our desperate efforts to locate our children, “the friend of an important military officer” would always turn up who, for a sum of money would
WOMEN AND CHILDCARE IN NICARAGUA

Women have been playing a major role in the Nicaraguan revolution. The establishment of new national priorities—even in the midst of difficult times—has allowed women to voice their concerns and get results. For example, as a result of women’s involvement in the formulation of the newly adopted constitution, one article states: “The government shall promote programs and develop special centers for minors.” Thus in spite of the pressures of war and an undeveloped economy, Nicaragua has nevertheless surpassed the United States in making a commitment to women’s liberation by supporting childcare.

The need for child care in Nicaragua is great. Many families are supported by single mothers—34 percent nationwide and 60 percent in Managua. This is in part due to Nicaraguan women entering the labor market in increasing numbers. Lourdes Beneria, professor of City and Regional Planning and Women’s Studies at Cornell University, points out that for the average Nicara-

and the U.S. -sponsored war: “The economic crisis, derived from the war but also from other factors, is very severe...Men are involved the war and can’t participate in production...People have to figure out a way to make ends meet.”

To ease the working woman’s burden, the Nicaraguan women’s association AMNLAE, in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Welfare, has been creating Child Development Centers. A total of 177 have been started. They consist of urban and rural daycare centers, children’s cafeterias and preventative disease clinics. These facilities benefit almost 27,000 children thereby helping many thousands of women who work.

Child care centers have also been organized by members of agricultural cooperatives and factory employees. Ms. Beneria worked last summer with the Nicaraguan Women’s Institute on a study of textile and garment workers, who are mostly women. She visited one large factory where the parents had
extremely undersupplied: “They needed everything, from beds to tables and desks and supplies for the kids. It was very moving to see how they had organized themselves. The parents do all kinds of fundraising, raffles—just as if they had more time, which they don’t.”

Amidst the destruction caused by the contras—more than a dozen daycare centers destroyed, over 9,000 children orphaned—and the economic deprivations caused by the continuing U.S. trade embargo, the people of Nicaragua push forward their priority for child care.

The Local Solidarity Action: Los Laureles
Friends of Nicaragua, with assistance from CUSLAP, and in conjunction with children in Central America, has made its 1988 project the Los Laureles Child Development Center. We are raising material aid for Los Laureles and hope to set up “twinning” activities between that center and child care centers in the Ithaca area.

Los Laureles was organized by union women (from the ATC) who work on a complex of farms outside Esteli. There are over 200 women working in the area, 80 percent single mothers with an average of 4-5 children, so there is tremendous need. Los Laureles serves over 100 children from the ages of 6 months to six years.

Friends of Nicaragua began this project in an effort to provide material aid where it is needed, and also as a way to reach people not usually reached in our
person to person connections between children, parents and teachers here and in Nicaragua.

If you have connections to the local childcare community, please get in touch with us, so that we can set up possible exchanges of photos, pictures, and songs. We are also continuing to do fundraising to provide Los Laureles with badly needed diapers, toys, nap mats, shoes, and construction materials. If you would like to contribute, please send your check (made out to Friends of Nicaragua or, if tax deductible to MADRE) to Friends of Nicaragua, P.O Box 4535, Ithaca NY 14852.

Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinoza

End the U.S. Embargo Against the People of Nicaragua

President Reagan declared an embargo against Nicaragua on May 1, 1985 under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act. He has renewed the embargo every six months as required by law, even though the embargo itself is in violation of a number of international laws and agreements (it violates the charters of the United Nations, the Organization of American States, the World Bank, the General Agreements on Tariffs and Trade and the Treaty on Friendship, Commerce and Navigation between the United States and Nicaragua). Moreover, the embargo violates the intent of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act intended to be invoked only in the event of true national emergencies.

Much beyond the laws it violates, the embargo is a form of warfare against the Nicaraguan people. The Central American Historical Institute (CAHI) estimates that by the end of 1986 the embargo had cost Nicaragua $187.8 million. In human terms, this has meant scarcities, runaway inflation, overcrowded and deteriorating buses, continual power blackouts, as well as water and gas rationing. The embargo prohibits the following:

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Let the People Decide
Uruguay Update

Uruguayan military officers who illegally seized power and imposed a harsh, Argentine-style dictatorship upon Uruguay from 1973-1984 may face trials for their human rights violations as a result of an effective grassroots petition campaign.

In 1985 when Uruguayan voters went to the polls to elect a new parliament, they also voted for an amnesty for all of Uruguay’s remaining political prisoners. The following year the parliament passed a similar, but highly controversial package for the military. The military asserted that it was less guilty than the “guerillas” released from the prisons and should not be punished for having prevented Uruguay from becoming “another Cuba or Nicaragua.”

But many Uruguayans believe that the military, like all other groups protected by the constitution, must be accountable for its actions—and, in this case—atrocities. On February 22, 1988, the grassroots organization “Yo Firme Para Que El Pueblo Decida” (I sign so that the People may decide) presented a petition with 635,000 signatures to the parliament. The group was required to attain 555,000 signatures in order to call for a referendum.

Presently the signatures are being counted and verified and the referendum is expected in July. A favorable outcome will represent a major victory for democracy in Uruguay because it will restore the principle of equal accountability before the law and equal justice under it.

-Bruce Armstrong

(Embargo...Continued from page 21)

1. Import of Nicaraguan goods or services to the U.S.;
2. Export of U.S. goods to Nicaragua, except for the “resistance”;
3. Vessels of Nicaraguan registry entering U.S. ports;
4. Nicaraguan air carriers landing in the U.S.; and
5. Any transaction relating to these provisions.

The embargo is part of a larger “economic war” against Nicaragua which includes blocking loans and aid from banks and multilateral lending institutions, discouraging allies from giving economic support and the costs of the war exceeded $3.6 billion. (figures by CAHI 10-26-87).

Congress has the authority under the National Emergency Act to nullify the state of emergency and thus override renewal of the embargo by a majority vote of both houses of Congress in the form of a concurrent resolution. This can be done at any time.” Reagan could veto the nullification, but a 2/3 vote in Congress would override his veto.
Elections in Ecuador

In Ecuador, May 8th marked the end of an electoral process which has been in progress since January of this year. Ecuadorians elected Roderigo Borja Cevallos of the Izquierda Democrática [Social Democrat] party as the successor to President Febres Cordero. Although his popularity seemed precarious in the weeks leading up to the election, Borja defeated his opponent, Abdala Bucaram Ortiz, by a solid margin of 46.3 to 41.3%. Notably, both candidates represent socialist parties; a departure from the conservative Social Christian party which supported president Febres. As early as the preliminary election on January 31, Borja of the Social Democrats and Bucaram of the Populist party were decidedly more popular than the conservative candidate.

The election of a socialist candidate marks a turning point from the Febres regime, which has been in power since 1984. President Febres’ administration was characterized by conservative economic policies, frequent transgressions of the bounds of presidential power and a decided increase in the number of human rights violations.

President-elect Borja is faced with one of the most severe economic crises in Ecuador’s history, which he hopes to ameliorate through increased state involvement in the national economy, and re-negotiation of the terms of Ecuador’s foreign debt. Borja has stated that although he is critical of U.S. foreign policy in Central America, he seeks a 'cordial relationship' with the Reagan Administration.

-Rosie Vanek
resent the victims of violence.

Q. Is the governmental human rights commission a farce? Does it defend human rights?

A. The work of this commission is to go around justifying and hiding the evidence of human rights violations. For example, I remember last year there was a military operation in the region of Anglares. Twenty-two campesinos were captured, among them a two-month old girl and 12-year old boy. The governmental human rights commission gave us a list of all the people who had been captured and then released. Two were missing from the list. The military personnel denied capturing these two people, but the people released said they had all been captured together. The governmental human rights commission had taken the released people to the bus terminal and had told them to go, so that they wouldn't be seen by the press. This is an example of the way these people work. They always try to hide the facts. All these [captured] people had been beaten, tortured, and the people in the governmental human rights commission didn't want others to see evidence of this abuse.

Q. I know that the governmental accused a young student, Jorge Alberto Miranda, of your husband's murder. Is he still being held in prison?

He confessed before the judge on January 4, 1988 that he was responsible for the assassination of my husband. This is what he had told the press, because he had been forced to take money and he [and his family] had been threatened. But after that, he decided to change his declaration, and he presented an application to the judge to be able to declare again. The judge made an appointment for him to speak before the court. But the Minister of Justice, who had presented [Miranda] as the guilty one, and had said he was sure he was guilty, said there was no legal basis for him to be allowed back in court. They didn't want the press to see him. He recanted before the judge in Mariona prison, said he had nothing to do with the assassination of my husband.

Even some witnesses who saw the assassins say it wasn't Miranda. They detained him using a false statement, taken under duress (pressure and threats), and that's it. This is an example of the way in which the judiciary branch of our government works.

Q. I'd like to ask about the organization of women in El Salvador.

I worked with and observed closely the Institute of University Women [IMU]. I even went there to give a talk about the marginal position of women in legal terms, in relation to the constitution and the civil and penal codes. They ran a lot of activities to educate women about their rights. There is no 'feminist' movement in El Salvador. What exists is the realization, the growing awareness of the role that women should play in our struggle to win our elemental democratic freedoms for everyone. And this is happening because women have been forced by circumstances to take this
position. I am not involved in this kind of work because I looked for or wanted it, but because at a particular moment I was involved in such an unfair incident that I had to expose the reality of that incident, and I had to explain to the world who were the ones assassinating [not only my husband but a lot of other people], and for what reasons.

In El Salvador there are really very serious problems of inequality in the conditions of men and women. The thing is that most of the families in El Salvador do not have fathers. The woman is the one who generally takes responsibility for the children. There is a big group of children who have been abandoned by their fathers—their fathers don't even recognize them, have never even held them. There's another, smaller group of children whose fathers recognize them and help them once in a while, but the fathers of these kids don't take direct responsibility for them. And then there's another group of families in which the mother and father are a couple, but still the major responsibility—economic aid and nurturing—is the mother's. The father in these families has the attitude, "I'll give you 200 colones and you have to take care of the house and family." The mother has to find ways to stretch this money. Since it's not enough, she has to go into the informal sector. She has to sell food, wash other people's clothes, or even go out to work in a factory. Besides that, she has to take care of the children, make sure that they are clean, that they study. The other group of families, which is very very small, is those in which both mother and father share responsibility. University-associated men are not usually this conscious because their socialization is that you're a man, you cannot go into the kitchen, you can't cry because you're a man. Poor men, they can't even cry! But this is a very difficult situation, and the only way to improve it is through education, beginning when boys are very little.

Now, with the war, there is another group of families in which women have had to stay alone with their children, because their husbands have been disappeared, killed or forced to join the guerrilla movement. La Federacion de Comite de Madres [official name: Federation of Committees of the Mothers of the Disappeared, Political Prisoners and Assassinated of El Salvador, Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, or CoMadres] is a group of people I really admire, because they are very brave. Most of them are women but there are
some men. They have had to express their concern in an alternative way, because there isn’t a legal (formal) channel they can use to ensure that an investigation is conducted regarding their disappeared family members. When someone disappears, there is a legal channel (a writ of habeus corpus)—we have it, but it doesn’t work.

The task of CoMadres is also to administer denunciations. Basically, it is a committee of family members, especially mothers, of people who have disappeared or been assassinated for committing political “crimes.” They work helping other people who also have these problems. If someone has a husband or a son or any family member who has disappeared, they go to the committee, and these people give them some economic aid or just emotional support. In these times, it is really hard for the family members to find themselves suddenly with no one to help them. The special characteristic of this group is that they are the families of someone who has disappeared or suffered persecution. And this is of course another forum from which to denounce the violation of human rights.

Notes:


4. Orlando Letelier, former ambassador of Chile to the U.S., was assassinated in the U.S. while working to denounce the 1973 coup that lifted the Pinochet dictatorship to power.

5. Archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated in 1980 while celebrating Mass in San Salvador.