

## Fact Sheet on Human Rights in El Salvador The Case of Political Murders

In recent years, violence in El Salvador has increased to levels experienced during the civil war. According to recent data from the 2007 Census, 61 murders occurred per every 100,000 inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> Colombia, a country currently in a state of war, reports a rate of 38 murders per every 100,000 inhabitants, while the average worldwide is only 14 murders per 100,000 inhabitants.<sup>2</sup>

What is more troubling is the level of impunity with which these crimes are committed. A study conducted by the UNDP-El Salvador, using a sample of 20% of the total homicides committed in 2005, found that only 4% of cases were prosecuted while 96% remained unsolved.<sup>3</sup> Police authorities attribute most of the murders to common crime, including gang violence. However, according to the Legal Department of the Archbishop in San Salvador, only 31% of the homicides investigated by their office in 2007 could be attributed to gangs and common crime while 69% fit the profile of social "cleansing" and death squad types of crimes.<sup>4</sup>

The Foundation for the Application and Study of Law (FESPAD) and other human rights organizations have documented the murders of social activists from 2006 through 2008<sup>5</sup>, including:

- Holman Riva, FMLN<sup>6</sup> organizer and employee of the City of Ilopango (July 2008);
- Bartolo Cerritos, community organizer (June 2008);
- Angel Martínez Cerón, Coordinator of the Revolutionary Socialist Student Group (June 2008);
- Walter Ayala Ulloa, Secretary of Press and Propaganda for the FMLN Youth of Santo Tomás. (May 2008);
- Walter Alexander Riva, Homan Riva's nephew (May 2008);
- Hector Ventura, young activist who had been detained with thirteen other leaders and accused of terrorism for participating in a peaceful protest against water privatization (May 2008);
- William Landaverde, son of FMLN organizers (May 2008);
- Alejandro Portillo, member of the Neighborhood Watch for Chauton (April 2008);
- Omar Huezo, member of the National Civil Police (PNC) and security staff for FMLN Congressman Gerson Martínez (April 2008);
- Henry Navarrete. Killed along Omar Huezo (April 2008);
- Julio Edgardo Rodríguez, community leader (April 2008);
- Wilber Funes, FMLN Mayor of Alegría, Usulután (January 2008);
- Zulma Rivera, employee of the City of Alegría (January 2008);
- Salvador Sánchez, investigative reporter (September 2007);
- Miguel Angel Vasquez, union leader (July 2007);
- Alejandro Franco, member of an FMLN Youth Group (May 2007);
- Gerson Alvayero, member of the FMLN and the Movement Against Dams (January 2007);
- Francisco Carrillo, Lutheran Pastor (November 2006);
- Jesús Calzada de Carillo, Lutheran Pastor (November 2006);
- Alex Wilber Flores, FMLN organizer (August 2006);
- Lidia Mercedes Peñate, FMLN organizer (August 2006);
- Husband and wife Alex Wilgberto Flores and Lidia Peñate de Flores, FMLN activists (August 2006);
- Husband and wife Francisco Manzanares and Juana de Manzanares, FMLN activists (July 2006);
- Eligio Ramírez, local FMLN leader (March 2006).

As the 2009 Presidential elections approach, the number of death squad style crimes against opposition leaders is increasing, and in turn creating a climate of fear. Other intimidation tactics that are becoming more common are death threats to opposition leaders, community organizers and members of nongovernmental organizations. In a press release dated May 15, 2008, the International Federation for

Human Rights and the World Organization against Torture denounced the death threats made anonymously against Miguel Montenegro, Executive Director of the non-governmental Human Rights Commission of El Salvador (CDHES). Mr. Montenegro was threatened May 14, 2008, a week after CDHES organized a forum entitled “Current Impunity, Pending Justice and the Need for an International Penal Code”. The forum raised the issue of the war crimes committed during the twelve-year Salvadoran civil war, which remain unsolved due to the General Amnesty Law approved in 1993 after the peace accords were signed.

### Why Should Congress Care about Human Rights in El Salvador?

1. The worsening of the human rights situation in El Salvador in the pre-electoral presidential period is creating a climate of fear that threatens the right of Salvadorans to freely choose their leaders. This climate of fear generates social instability and erodes the achievements gained in the 1992 peace accords.
2. El Salvador is a country in which the US has developed close relationships in terms of diplomacy, military aid, and trade and development. El Salvador has been granted \$460.94 million in development aid through the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). Among the selection criteria for country eligibility are civil liberties, political rights, rule of law, and government accountability.<sup>7</sup> The US Government has the obligation to monitor country performance on these indicators, not only because the program uses taxpayer money, but also because failure on those indicators will endanger the development goals that the MCC aims to achieve in El Salvador.
3. El Salvador has hosted the US-sponsored International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) for Latin America since 2005. It is ironic that El Salvador remains the most violent country in Latin America despite the presence of the academy, whose main goals are “to support the strengthening of penal justice institutions in Latin America, contributing to the consolidation of a State of Law, with respect to Human Rights and the Democratic Institutions and Law Enforcement”<sup>8</sup>
4. As violence and economic and social crisis increase, Salvadorans are forced to emigrate. According to the former US Ambassador to El Salvador Douglas Barclay approximately 740 Salvadorans try to migrate to the US every day, of which approximately 94% immigrate to the country successfully. As long as the economic and political conditions in El Salvador continue to deteriorate, this trend is not likely to change. In 2007, El Salvador received approximately \$3.6 billion in remittances, which represented 18% of the GDP.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rate calculated with data from the 2007 Census and the National Civilian Police.

<sup>2</sup> AFP-Mérida Mexico 3/18/08.

<sup>3</sup> UNDP El Salvador 2007. Deficiencias policiales, fiscales o judiciales en la investigación y juzgamiento causantes de impunidad. El Salvador.

<sup>4</sup> Tutela Legal del Arzobispado de El Salvador. 2006. La Violencia Homicida y Otros Patrones de Grave Afectación a los Derechos Humanos en El Salvador. El Salvador.

<sup>5</sup> The Foundation for the Application and Study of Law (FESPAD). <http://www.fespad.org.sv>

<sup>6</sup> Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). Former guerilla social equality movement that became a political party after the Peace Accords were signed in 1992. The FMLN is one of two major political parties in the country.

<sup>7</sup> Millennium Challenge Corporation. <http://www.mcc.gov/countries/index.php>

<sup>8</sup> US Department of State. <http://www.state.gov/p/inl/ilea/>

<sup>9</sup> Salvadoran Central Reserve Bank <http://www.bcr.gob.sv>