

War poverty and earthquakes made 1986 a long year for Salvadorans.

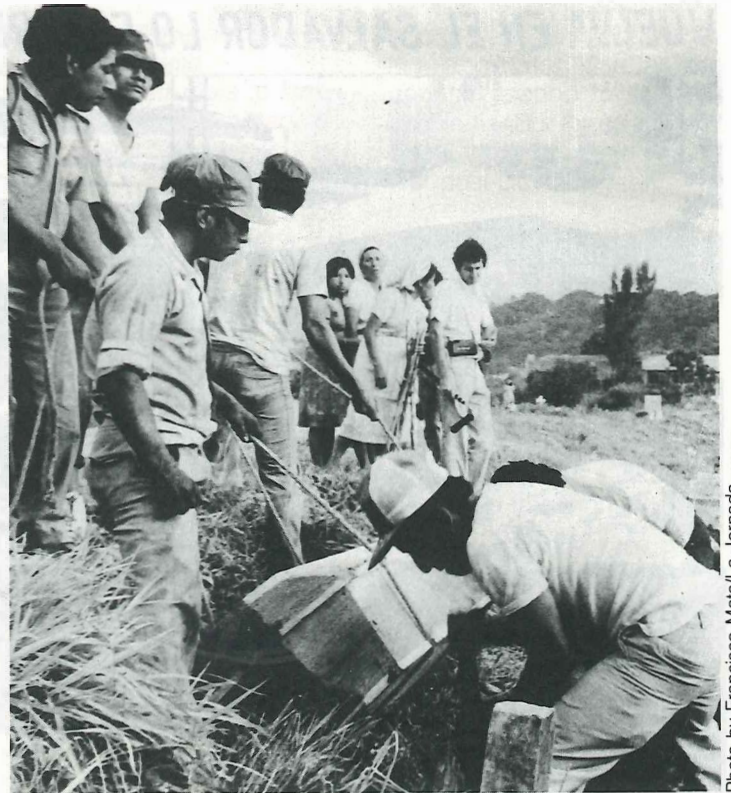
The general view of things in Central America in early 1986 was more or less as follows: Nicaragua is the main critical point, and the situation in El Salvador is relatively stable. According to many observers, the war in El Salvador was at an impasse between the armed opposition forces of the FMLN and the government's armed forces. Yet by the end of the year the regional picture had changed.

On the one hand, there is a widespread perception that the Sandinistas have consolidated their positions and managed to deal the *contras* a strategic defeat. Both aspects will be enhanced as the Iran-Contras affair makes it increasingly difficult for the Reagan Administration to continue supporting the counter-revolutionaries, and as the anti-Sandinistas' defeat is more explicitly manifest.

On the other hand, events in El Salvador have also taken a different turn. Three main factors contribute to the new situation: the FMLN's increased military strength, the broad-based resurgence of mass struggles and the unfolding of a political crisis within the ruling block, meaning the increasing instability of the Duarte government. Unlike what may seem to be the case, the earthquake that shook San Salvador in Oct. 1986 is not the key factor leading to the crisis. The main components of today's critical situation were present before the earthquake.

FMLN Commander Joaquín Villalobos referred to the situation in El Salvador, in a document that appeared in the magazine ECA in April, 1986, published by the Central American University, UCA, in San Salvador: "It is not true the war is at a stalemate. In conceptual terms it is possible to speak of a phase of strategic equilibrium in a popular war, but it is wrong to say the war is at an impasse.

Phoenix Brings Bad Luck to El Salvador



Burying the dead following the earthquake

Photo by Francisco Mata/La Jornada

The concept of strategic equilibrium has a different meaning in a popular war. It refers precisely to the moment when the revolutionary forces have left the strategic defensive and are nearing the possibility of a counteroffensive."

1986 opened with the most complex counterinsurgency operation launched by the Salvadoran military during the six years of war: Operation Phoenix. Its purpose was to recover the Guazapa Volcano, an FMLN bastion in the very heart of the country. Just 19 miles from the capital city, Guazapa is a strategic enclave in the military correlation of forces. By June the Salvadoran armed forces ad-

mitted that Operation Phoenix had not yielded the results they had expected; it has not been possible to dislodge the FMLN's fighters from the area, nor did the army gain a stable hold on the vital military position.

In sum, on the military front the FMLN has maintained its forces, consolidated its territorial control in the north and east of the country, and increased the operational mobility of its troops. It has also further developed internal unity among the five organizations that make up the revolutionary alliance and agreed on new programmatic foundations and margins of political independence with its allies in the Revolution-

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ary Democratic Front, the FDR (Frente Democrático Revolucionario).

These factors are probably what has done away with the triumphalist tone the Salvadoran high command maintained during most of 1984 and 1985. Even U.S. military advisors stationed in the country have been forced to admit that the war has run into snags, and that "in the

continuous upsurge in mass struggles.

What has probably provoked this new wave of popular unrest and struggle is the government's decision early last year to impose a series of economic measures, known as the *paquetazo*, in an attempt to increase local financing of the war, given that over 50% of the national budget is currently provided

by the White House. The measures included devaluation of El Salvador's currency, the *Colón*, by 100%, price increases and heavier taxes. All of this led to deteriorating living conditions for large sectors of the population, as well as to increased inflation and unemployment.

The *paquetazo* didn't turn the tide of the government's financial straits, but it un-

leashed popular protest in San Salvador, crystallizing several years of efforts to get the mass movement back on its feet. The Unión Nacional de Trabajadores Salvadoreños, UNTS (National Union of Salvadoran Workers), was formed during 1986, bringing together labor unions, peasant organizations, teachers, students, Indian groups and cultural workers. Throughout the year, tens of thousands took to the streets of San Salvador to protest Duarte's economic policy, and also demanding a stop to forcible conscription into the army, the renewal of peace talks with the insurgency and an end to U.S. intervention.

An idea of the dimensions of this new mass movement can be had from the fact that 40,000 people marched through the streets of the capital just a few days before the earthquake, and on Nov. 22, 50,000 people turned out. The recomposition of the Salvadoran mass movement in the capital city was the decisive new factor on the scene last year, and it is the main dynamic element in the present situation.

This is an experienced and politicized movement with a strong fighting spirit. It has

VUELVA EN EL SALVADOR LO ESTAREMOS ESPERANDO!



Photo by Francisco Mata/La Jornada

Refugee camp for earthquake victims in San Salvador

best of cases it will take 10 or 12 years to defeat the guerrillas."

But it would be wrong to try to analyze the war in El Salvador from the point of view of regular warfare, as a series of clearly defined military fronts and parties deciding the course of the conflict from one battle to another. Thus, for example, Villalobos states that, "...in 1983, despite the fact that the FMLN's military activity placed the government's armed forces in an extremely difficult situation, the absence of an upsurge in mass struggles kept our victories from leading to more significant changes in the relation of forces." An additional new factor that is present today is that, as of last year, there has been a

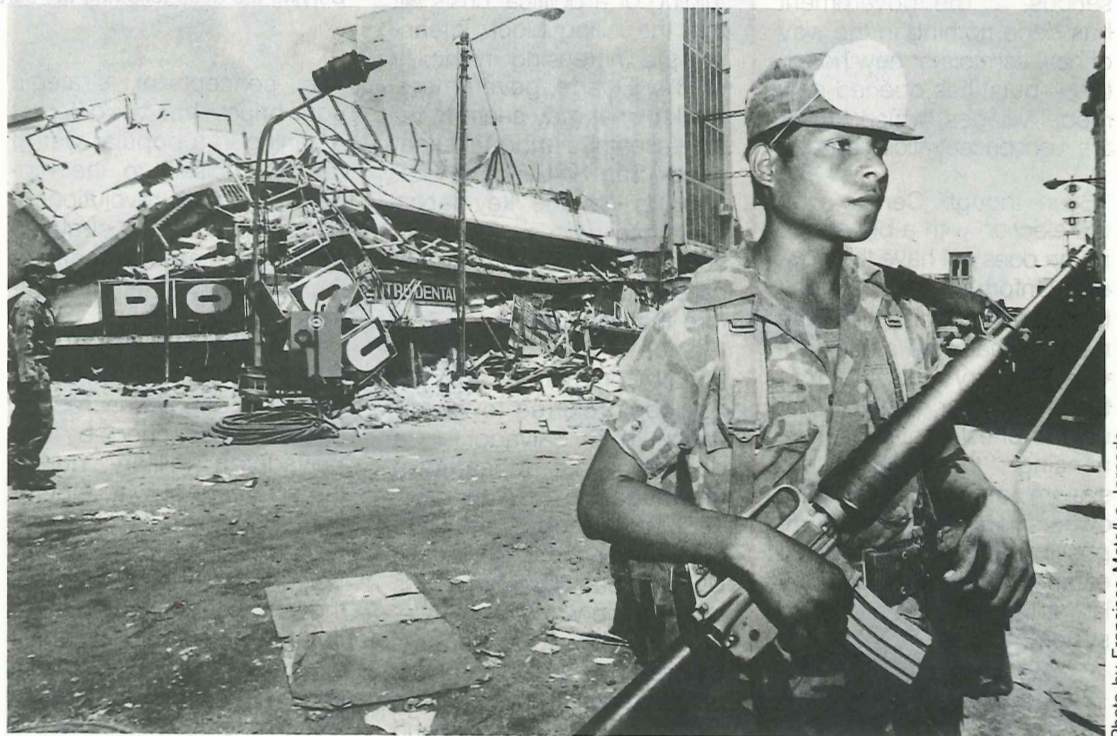


Photo by Francisco Mata/La Jornada

A soldier watching over the ruins of Hotel San Salvador after the earthquake

withstood eight years of near-genocidal efforts to destroy it, emerging undefeated and with many of its foundations still in place. These newly reactivated masses also constitute the main obstacle in the path of the counter-insurgency project designed by the U.S., namely, isolating the insurgency from the popular and workers' movement and building a social base in support of the dominant regime. Duarte, a sector of the Salvadoran military and North American strategists know that an irregular war cannot be won solely on the battlefield; winning requires the division of the popular forces and the construction of an alternate social base.

Duarte cannot seriously expect to build his own social base with the level of repression unleashed by his government, just as neither his economic or political policies contribute to that goal either. A U.S. journalist aptly summed up the situation in late December: "Duarte is losing control of the streets without having recovered control of the mountains."

And Duarte is also losing control of his own house. Right-wing political forces began 1987 with a destabilizing offensive against the government, a campaign supported by big business and some sectors of the military. Specifically, big business refuses to pay a new tax called, "For the Defense of National Sovereignty," that would be applied to income in order to finance the war. Businessmen refuse to pay for two reasons: first, they are pretty sure the money will end up in the pockets of government officials, and second, they believe the regime is losing the war. In order to manifest their opposition, the right wing has resorted to a parliamentary work stoppage, while large-scale private enterprise shut down their businesses.

But the right-wing forces don't have a better project to defeat the insurgency and

the popular movement. Their only proposal is to unleash another round of genocide, a large-scale killing capable of restoring "social peace" to El Salvador. This means, in effect, resorting to the method applied over half a century ago in 1932, when over 30,000 people were slaughtered following a popular uprising.

At the same time, North American strategists know that El Salvador doesn't necessarily need more people killed, and that genocide will probably not turn the situation around. There are eloquent figures pointing to this, as the repression under Duarte has been one of the most severe in the country's history.

Today the regime is face to face with a popular movement that has overcome these past bloody years at a cost of some 20,000 dead. Under certain conditions mass repression can disarticulate a movement, but under others it only adds new energy to the struggle. This poses the greatest risk to the solution proposed by the extreme right forces. But however uncertain this option may be, many seem willing to resort to it if they have no other recourse.

Washington cannot allow the Duarte government and its counterinsurgency model to collapse, for it would mean its own defeat. And for now the White House seems to have no better option than Duarte, at a time when its own political difficulties make it harder, though by no means impossible, for the U.S. to increase its own direct involvement in the conflict.

When Alexander Haig took office as Secretary of State in 1980 he chose El Salvador as the test case for the Reagan Administration's Central America policy. Now, toward the end of Mr. Reagan's second term, El Salvador may also become the test case for that same policy's failure.★

Augusto Morales