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EL SALVADOR

THE MASSACRE AT EL MOZOTE: THE NEED TO REMEMBER

Introduction

With the negotiated cease-fire agreement signed on January 16, 1992, in Mexico City, the twelve-year-old conflict in El Salvador has formally come to an end. The agreements under United Nations supervision between the Salvadoran government and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) envision unprecedented reforms: to reduce the military, dissolve the elite, immediate-reaction battalions, eliminate two of the security forces, create a new National Civil Police, and demobilize the FMLN and fully integrate ex-guerrillas into civilian life. These transformations hold forth the greatest possibility yet for the respect for human rights and the achievement of social justice in El Salvador.

Two provisions of the peace agreement touch more directly on the question of human rights. In April 1991, the negotiating parties agreed to the formation of a Commission on Truth, which would review "grave acts of violence which have occurred since 1980 and whose mark on society demands with great urgency public knowledge of the truth." In September 1991, the Salvadoran government and the FMLN agreed to a process of "purification" of the armed forces, to be carried out by an *ad hoc* Commission, which would review the records of military officers with a special focus on their human rights records. Both Commissions have been named, and will begin their work in 1992.[1]

[1] The members of the Truth Commission are Belisario Betancur, former president of Colombia, Reinaldo Figueredo, former foreign minister of Venezuela, and Thomas Buergenthal, professor of law and president of the Inter-American

Institute for Human Rights in Costa Rica.

The members of the *ad hoc* Commission are Abraham Rodríguez, Eduardo Molina, and Reynaldo Galindo Pohl.

The formation of both the Truth Commission and the *ad hoc* Commission represents an acknowledgment that, just as human rights abuses helped give rise to the conflict, a lasting peace must be founded on respect for human rights. Members of political parties who met in January 1992 to discuss an amnesty law were mindful of the need to preserve some accountability for human rights abuses. The Law of National Reconciliation passed by the Legislative Assembly on January 23, 1992, specifically exempted from the amnesty cases which had been decided by a civilian jury (the Jesuit case, for example), and those cases for which the Truth Commission might recommend prosecution. The Salvadoran amnesty law is thus less sweeping than other amnesty laws promulgated at the end of civil conflict, which have granted blanket pardon to those who committed grave abuses.[2]

In order to further the prospects for accountability, this report examines one of the most egregious massacres of the entire conflict: the cold-blooded murder of hundreds of civilians in northern Morazán by Salvadoran troops of the U.S.-trained Atlacatl Battalion in December 1981. The massacre at El Mozote, probably the largest mass killing reported during the war, was a formative experience for most of the thousands of peasants and many of the guerrillas in northern Morazán. It and similar Army operations in Morazán sent thousands of peasants fleeing across the border into exile in Honduras, and helped fuel the growth of the guerrilla movement.

Americas Watch calls on the Truth Commission to include the El Mozote massacre in the cases it examines. Remembering this past episode of state terror helps to illuminate one of the root causes of the conflict: the indiscriminate violence visited upon the civilian population by government forces, and the absolute impunity enjoyed by those who committed such atrocities. Seeking accountability in this and other cases is not only a moral duty of the Salvadoran government, but also would help ensure that such episodes are never again repeated.

A re-examination of this case is also important in order to clarify the U.S. role in El Salvador's decade of tragedy. The Bush administration made a laudable effort to press for a negotiated settlement in El Salvador and, ultimately, to press for necessary reforms. But such was not always the case with U.S. policy. For most of the decade, the U.S. government sought to underplay or deny outright the many atrocities committed by Salvadoran troops. The massacre of El Mozote was never fully investigated by the U.S. Embassy when it occurred, much less by the Salvadoran government. Nor were reports of several other massacres by the Atlacatl Battalion ever given credence by the U.S. Embassy, despite testimony taken by human rights groups and prominent U.S. journalists. The denial is such that a decade later, in mid-1991, human rights and other political officers at the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador questioned by Americas Watch *had never even heard* of the massacre at El Mozote, much less of the involvement of the Atlacatl Battalion.

U.S. denial or willful ignorance of human rights abuses during the 1980s reflected a structural flaw in administration policy. The Reagan administration believed that, by increasing U.S. training and equipping of the Salvadoran armed forces and by encouraging elections, the FMLN guerrillas could be defeated militarily and politically. The administration

[2] The Salvadoran amnesty does, however, provide the Assembly with a chance to review the law six months after the Truth Commission completes its work. At that time, a blanket amnesty may well be granted.

also believed that preventing the fall of the Salvadoran government was vital to U.S. security. To the extent that admitting human rights abuses would compromise U.S. support for the Salvadoran government, the Reagan administration and its successor had an incentive to downplay, distort, or deny the human rights record of the Salvadoran Army.

The U.S. Congress, while giving greater voice to human rights concerns, was complicit in administration policy, by providing ever larger sums of economic and military aid. The congressional majority was unwilling to deny aid because it shared the administration's fear of "losing" El Salvador.

The brutal murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter in late 1989, again by members of the U.S.-trained Atlacatl Battalion, underscored how fraudulent was the notion that U.S. training had led to fundamental changes in the armed forces' mentality. Following the Jesuit murders, however, the international community -- and the Congress -- took notice, contributing to pressures that helped bring about an end to the conflict.

One can only speculate as to whether the war could have ended long ago had the truth about massacres like El Mozote been pursued by the U.S. government.

The Massacre of El Mozote

In the barracks of the Fourth Military Detachment in San Francisco Gotera, the departmental capital of Morazán, hangs a framed poster bearing the picture of Lieutenant Colonel Domingo Monterrosa, the infamous founding commander of the Atlacatl Battalion. His fist is raised, and the poster is inscribed thus: "We must liberate our peasant brothers, slaves of the communist terrorism in the northern hills of the country."

"Liberate," however, is hardly the word that could be used to describe what the military did, under Monterrosa's command, during the campaign called "Operation Rescue," carried out in northern Morazán between December 8 and 16, 1981.

According to a report released by the Archdiocesan human rights office Tutela Legal on November 9, 1991, the Salvadoran military carried out a massacre of horrendous proportions over a period of several days in mid-December 1981 in the towns of El Mozote, La Joya, Cerro Pando, Ranchería, Los Toriles, and Jocote Amarillo in northern Morazán. The Tutela report reconstructs the events which took place during that period and lists 794 victims, a large percentage of them small children, who were killed during a three-day period that began December 11.[3]

The Tutela Legal report charges that the Atlacatl Battalion, which had been created and trained earlier in the year by U.S. advisers as an elite anti-guerrilla force, directed most of the slaughter, although the report does not rule out the participation of other forces. It singles out as the directors of the operation the head of the Atlacatl Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Domingo Monterrosa, and the unnamed heads of the Third Brigade and the military detachment in San Francisco Gotera. According to information provided to Americas Watch by the Los Angeles-based El Rescate, the head of the Third Brigade at the time was

[3] Oficina de Tutela Legal del Arzobispado, "*Investigación de la Masacre de El Mozote y Lugares Aledaños*," November 9, 1991, pp. 1-81.

Lieutenant Colonel Jaime Ernesto Flores Grijalva, and the head of the Fourth Military Detachment was Elmer González Araujo. González Araujo was subsequently commander of the garrison in Sonsonate province when his troops carried out a massacre of over 70 peasants of the Las Hojas farming cooperative in February 1983.

According to Tutela Legal, the Salvadoran Air Force was also involved in transporting troops and rocketing villages. At one point during the massacre, witnesses reported to Tutela Legal that a helicopter carrying the three commanders arrived in the central plaza of El Mozote to survey the operation. The report identifies Major Cáceres Cabrera, who was the executive officer of the Atlacatl and in charge of the ground operation, and a Captain Salazar, who commanded one of five companies of the Atlacatl that participated in the massacre.[4]

The testimonies taken by Tutela Legal come in large part from the dozens of survivors in the different villages who either saw or heard the killing carried out by government troops. Many of those later fled Morazán into refugee camps in Honduras and have only returned to El Salvador in the last two years. In addition, it is extremely doubtful that Tutela could have gathered such detail about the massacre without inside sources from the military.

The eighty-one page report follows the military operation chronologically, beginning December 8, 1981, when troops were transported by helicopter to the town of Perquín. The National Guard stationed in Perquín forcibly recruited ten civilians to help carry the equipment of the officers in charge of each of the five companies. The report also asserts that lists were distributed to the commanders that contained the names of persons to be assassinated. Later in the afternoon of the 8th, the companies began to spread out south from Perquín toward El Mozote and Arambala.

On December 9, the Tutela report notes that military units engaged guerrilla forces in fighting near Arambala, which is a little over a mile from El Mozote. The report indicates, however, that the guerrillas left the zone after the fighting. Various civilians were detained by Army troops, but later set free after convincing their captors that they were not guerrilla supporters. Major Cáceres Cabrera was later overheard as having claimed to have murdered some twenty-five people in Arambala who were on his list of those to be killed.

By the evening of December 10, troops from all five of the companies had arrived in El Mozote, where they spent the night. The report explains that a businessman named Marcos Díaz had been told by soldiers in early December that a military operation would soon begin and that persons who went to El Mozote would be safe; others found in the outlying villages would be killed. On the basis of Díaz's information, many people from communities around El Mozote took refuge in the town just before the operation began, hoping to escape harm.

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[4] Major Cáceres is Natividad de Jesus Cáceres Cabrera, a member of the Military Academy's Class of 1966 (known as the *tandona*, or large class). In June 1989 he was transferred to Chile as military attaché after a nasty face-off on a country road between his troops and a caravan carrying U.S. Ambassador William Walker. According to information compiled by El Rescate, Cáceres was a guest instructor at the U.S. Army School of the Americas in Fort Gulick, Panama in the early 1970s.

The head of operations of the Atlacatl at the time was Major José Armando Azmitia, later killed by the FMLN.

Captain Walter Oswaldo Salazar, from the Military Academy's Class of 1972, was the Commander of the third company of the Atlacatl Battalion from 1981-1982.

At 5 a.m. on December 11, soldiers took all the villagers from their houses and gathered them in two lines in the main plaza, one for men and the other for women and children. At 7 a.m., the men were taken to the church and the women and children to the house of a villager named Alfredo Márquez. The women were interrogated about whether they collaborated with the guerrillas and about the location of arms caches, and were threatened with death if they did not tell the truth. At 8 a.m., soldiers with machetes started beheading the men in the church, who had been bound, blindfolded, and beaten. Some men who tried to escape were gunned down.

Between 8 a.m. and 2 p.m., other men and women were also taken blindfolded to an area near the schoolhouse and forced to lie facedown on the ground, where they were then shot. At mid-day, soldiers took some of the youngest women away, leaving their children behind, and raped and murdered them. Other women were taken to the house of another villager, Israel Márquez, where they were shot to death. Later in the evening, when it came time to carry out the order to kill the children, Tutela Legal reports that one of the soldiers objected but was reminded by another soldier that they were under orders to finish off everyone; as an example to the troops, Major Caceres Cabrera reportedly killed the first baby by throwing it into the air and catching it on his bayonet. The children were then taken to the house of Alfredo Márquez and stabbed and shot to death. At the end of the day, all the houses in El Mozote were set afire.

Although only one eyewitness, Rufina Amaya, appears to have survived the massacre at El Mozote, others from the nearby villages of Tierra Colorada and Las Pilas could hear the firing and see the columns of smoke. Others hiding even closer could hear the cries of victims as they were being killed. Amaya, who saw her husband gunned down as he tried to flee the church, was in one of the last groups of women to be taken out of the house, and managed to escape and hide in a nearby tree. She left behind her four daughters, including one of only eight months, all of whom were killed. Tutela Legal lists 393 victims in El Mozote alone, while noting that many of the children killed are probably not accounted for.

As the carnage in El Mozote was unfolding, troops entered the village of La Joya and engaged in a similar slaughter, taking at least 148 victims by Tutela Legal's count. In the following two days, on December 12 and 13, the communities of Ranchería, Los Toriles, Jocote Amarillo and Cerro Pando were also the sites of massacres of the civilian population.

In all, Tutela Legal has tabulated a list of 794 victims of the massacre, although the true number is very likely much higher.

The Massacre Becomes Known

The Lack of Press Coverage in El Salvador

At the time of the massacre, little information was generally available to the Salvadoran public as to the nature of military operations in the countryside. There was no opposition press in the early 1980s, and such information that did exist was controlled by the armed forces. On December 9, 1981, the Salvadoran daily *La Prensa Gráfica* had this to say about "Operation Rescue":[5]

[5] The operation was also known as "*Yunque y Martillo*" or "Hammer and Anvil."

> All the highways with access to Gotera and the other towns in the department of Morazán, are under strict military control, in order to prevent the penetration of extremist groups. The control has also been put in place in the entrances and exits of these locations. Vehicles or individuals are not permitted to enter the conflictive zones in order to avoid accidents or misunderstandings.
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> Ambulances of the Salvadoran Red Cross and other service organizations were left without access to the sectors under strict control of the Army to avoid whatever regrettable or unpleasant act, said the military source...Neither was the entry of journalists and individuals permitted.

The Salvadoran press did report that Colonel Jaime Ernesto Flores, commander of the Third Infantry Brigade in San Miguel, along with Colonel Linares in San Francisco Gotera, participated in the control of the operation, which included soldiers from infantry, artillery, Air Force and civil defense units, as well as the National Police, Treasury Police and National Guard.[6] A United Press International report that ran in *La Prensa Gráfica* on December 9, 1981, noted that the Atlacatl battalion also participated in the operation.

As far as can determined from a review of the Salvadoran press, the official results of the operation were never published. However, on December 19, *La Prensa Gráfica* published a small, one-sentence note saying that "unofficially" at least 175 terrorists and twelve soldiers were killed during the operation.

U.S. Press Accounts of the Massacre

Word of the massacre reached the United States in late January, following separate visits to El Mozote in mid-January by journalists Alma Guillermoprieto of the *Washington Post* and Raymond Bonner of the *New York Times*. The two reporters were led to the site by FMLN guerrillas, who had re-taken El Mozote and its surroundings approximately two weeks after the massacre, and who had denounced the mass killing in early January, 1981, over the rebel radio network, *Radio Venceremos*. Guillermoprieto's and Bonner's reports, which were published on January 27, 1982, provided the first evidence that Salvadoran troops had engaged in a brutal slaughter of civilians.[7]

The two reporters found that all of the buildings in El Mozote had been set on fire. In three of them, according to Guillermoprieto, body parts could be seen, as in the church, where "the stench was overpowering, and countless bits of bones--skulls, rib cages, femurs, a spinal column -- poked out of the rubble." Outside the main town, she saw further signs of the devastation:

> The road was littered with animal corpses, cows and horses. In the cornfields, behind the houses were more bodies, these unburned by fire but baked by the sun. In one

[6] *La Prensa Gráfica*, December 9, 1981. The identification of Colonel Linares as head of the Military Detachment No. 4 was in error. The head of the Fourth Detachment was Colonel Elmer González Araujo.

[7] Alma Guillermoprieto, "Salvadoran Peasants Describe Mass Killing," *Washington Post*, January 27, 1982; "Massacre of Hundreds Is Reported in El Salvador," *New York Times*, January 27, 1982.

grouping in a clearing in a field were 10 bodies; two elderly people, two children, one infant--a bullet hole in the head--in the arms of a woman, and the rest adults.

The two journalists talked to three survivors, including Rufina Amaya of El Mozote and two others from La Joya. Amaya, who was the only known survivor from the village of El Mozote, related how the Atlacatl Battalion had come to the village one evening to search their house and steal their money. "We knew the Army people, we felt safe," Amaya told Guillermoprieto, and also said that her husband was on good terms with the military. For that reason, people had decided to stay in Mozote, even though the guerrillas had warned them of an impending government offensive in early December.

However, early the next morning, the military returned to the village. According to the *Post* story, Amaya said the women were herded with their children into a house on the square. From there they saw the men being blindfolded and bound, kicked and thrown against each other, then taken away in groups of four and shot. "The soldiers had no fury," she said. "They just observed the lieutenant's orders. They were cold. It wasn't a battle."

When her turn came to be led away to the main square, Amaya managed to slip away and climb up a tree, where she was able to observe the killing.

The *New York Times* reported that villagers had compiled a list of 733 peasants, "mostly children, women, and old people," who they said had been murdered by soldiers of the Atlacatl battalion. Villagers told Bonner that, of the 482 civilians killed in the town of El Mozote alone, 280 were children under the age of fourteen.

In its subsequent attempt to discredit the journalists' accounts, the U.S. Embassy reported that only 320 people lived in El Mozote at the time and suggested that the list of names came from a civil registry stolen by the FMLN when it occupied the nearby town of Jocoaitique. However, Bonner was shown the list of 733 names several days before the guerrillas occupied Jocoaitique on January 12, 1981. Moreover, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross, which made weekly trips to deliver relief supplies in Morazán, there were at least 1000 people in El Mozote at the time.[8]

The Reagan Administration Response

A rough chronology of the Reagan administration's response to reports of the massacre is possible to reconstruct based on documents released through the Freedom of Information Act.[9] Although what has come to light is no doubt incomplete, the available evidence indicates that the U.S. government sought deliberately to deny or diminish reports of the massacre in order to protect U.S. support for the Salvadoran government.

On January 8, 1982, for example, U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador Deane Hinton responded to an inquiry from the U.S. National Council of Churches requesting confirmation of the massacre. In that reply, Hinton stated that the only reports of the massacre had come

[8] Raymond Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy in El Salvador* (New York: Times Books, 1984), p. 342-343.

[9] The documents are available from the National Security Archive in Washington, D.C., and include cables released to *New York Times* reporter Raymond Bonner and others.

from the "propaganda chief" of the FMLN's *Radio Venceremos*. "I certainly cannot confirm such reports [that there were 900 civilian deaths in Morazán]," Hinton wrote, "nor do I have any reason to believe they are true. None of the tested sources available to this Embassy has given us even hint [sic] of massive civilian casualties."[10]

U.S. press accounts of the massacre at El Mozote were first published just as the Reagan administration issued its first certification to Congress that the Salvadoran government was "making a concerted and significant effort to comply with internationally recognized human rights." Because the question of the massacre was likely to come up at congressional hearings on the certification, the State Department cabled the *New York Times* story to the U.S. Embassy, asking for further clarification. In a message approved by then-Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs Elliott Abrams, the State Department requested "any additional evidence available that might give further detail about the incident or substantiate [then-Minister of Defense José Guillermo] García's denials that it took place."[11]

In response to the State Department's request, Ambassador Hinton sent two Embassy officials to investigate. But the State Department's request indicated at least part of what Washington was after: evidence to discredit the press reports and bolster the Salvadoran Army's version of events. The two embassy officers who were sent to Morazán concluded that "there had been a massacre," according to a U.S. diplomat later interviewed by *New York Times* correspondent Raymond Bonner. But the officers sent back a cable "intentionally devoid of judgment" to satisfy what they thought Washington wanted to hear.[12]

The cable's description of what had occurred in El Mozote presumably came from Salvadoran military sources. It contained the judgment that civilians who died were killed in combat, not systematically murdered. According to the January 31, 1981, cable,

> Both guerrillas and civilians were present there when government forces approached El Mozote from the south during mid-operation on about December 11. Attacking troops encountered stiff guerrilla resistance from a trench line south of the settlement. Fighting there lasted about four hours until troops were able to penetrate the line with 90mm recoilless rifle fire. Soldiers were then moved forward into the settlement where they again came under fire and took casualties. Fighting continued and the town was partially destroyed. Civilians remaining in any part of the *cantón* could have been subject to injury as a result of the combat.

The cable offered the following conclusion:

> Although it is not possible to prove or disprove excesses of violence against the civilian population of El Mozote by government troops, it is certain that the guerrilla forces, who established defensive positions in El Mozote did nothing to remove them from the path of battle...Civilians did die during [the operation], but no evidence could

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[10] Cable, Deane R. Hinton to SecState, WashDC, "Subject: Alleged Morazán Massacre," January 8, 1982, p. 1.

[11] Cable, [Undersecretary of State Walter J.] Stoessel, Jr. to AmEmbassy San Salvador, "Subject: Allegations of Massacre in Morazán Department by Atlacatl Battalion," January 29, 1982, p. 2.

[12] Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit*, p. 341.

be found to confirm that government forces systematically massacred civilians in the operation zone.

The January 31 cable, which became the basis for State Department efforts in Congress to deny that the El Mozote massacre had occurred, did not mention that the two Embassy officers sent to investigate never reached the town of El Mozote, but rather, had overflown it in a helicopter.[13]

A subsequent cable dated February 17, 1982, and signed by U.S. Ambassador to Honduras John Negroponte lends greater credence to reports that there had been a massacre, but the cable appears not to have changed the U.S. position on El Mozote even if it was not willfully suppressed. The February 17 cable reported on a visit to the Salvadoran refugee camp at Colomoncagua earlier that month. The cable noted that refugees reported

> a military sweep in Morazán December 7 to 17 which they claim resulted in large numbers of civilian casualties and physical destruction, leading to their exodus. Names of villages cited coincide with *New York Times* article of January 28 same subject.

The cable concluded with the following comment:

> Most significant element in refugees' reports was their decision to flee at this time when in the past they had remained during sweeps. This lends credibility to reportedly greater magnitude and intensity of the GOES [Government of El Salvador] military operations in Northern Morazán.

This document was not made public until 1988.[14]

The Congressional Hearings

During early February appearances before the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Thomas O. Enders elaborated on information contained in the embassy's January 31, 1982 cable. "There is no evidence to confirm that Government forces systematically massacred civilians in the operations zone," he told the House committee, "or that the number of civilians remotely approached the 733 or 926 victims cited in the press." In his later appearance in the Senate, Enders quoted the cable's observation that "the guerrilla forces who established defensive positions in El Mozote did nothing to remove [civilians] from the path of battle." Nor, he said, was there evidence "that those who remained attempted to leave."[15]

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[13] U.S. Congress, House, Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Subcommittee on Oversight and Evaluation, Staff Report, "U.S. Intelligence Performance on Central America: Achievements and Selected Instances of Concern," September 22, 1982 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), p. 18.

[14] Cable, Negroponte to SecState, WashDC, "Subject: Reports of Alleged Massacre by Salvadoran Army," February 17, 1982, pp. 1-2.

[15] U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs, *Presidential Certification on El Salvador (Volume I)*, Hearings, February 2, 23, 25, and March 2, 1982, 97th Cong., 2d Sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), p. 26; and U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Certification Concerning Military Aid to El Salvador*, Hearings, February 8 and March 11, 1982, 97th Cong., 2d

During the Senate hearing, Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights Elliott Abrams artfully distorted several issues in order to discredit the public accounts of the massacre. Abrams noted, for example, that the estimates by the guerrillas changed several times and found it suspicious that an event which occurred in mid-December did not come out until just before the certification was due. The village of El Mozote was under control by the military until December 29, 1981, however (a fact reported in the January 31 cable); the area was heavily contested in that period, so it was not surprising that the guerrillas did not report the massacre until January 2, 1982, nor that the numbers of victims changed as the guerrillas discovered the full extent of the slaughter.

Abrams also insisted that the high numbers of victims reported in the press were implausible, pointing out that only three hundred people were reported to have been living in El Mozote at the time of the alleged massacre. Apart from the fact that one survivor said that there had been five hundred people in the village at the time, the comment blithely obscured that both the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* accounts clearly referred to El Mozote and several other villages.

A fierce campaign to discredit the press reports, and Raymond Bonner in particular, ensued. A lengthy editorial on February 10, 1982 in the *Wall Street Journal* attacked Bonner as being "overly credulous" of a guerrilla "propaganda exercise." The right-wing Accuracy in Media devoted virtually an entire newsletter to attacking Bonner's reporting as favoring Marxists. The *New York Times* executive editor, A.M. Rosenthal, travelled to El Salvador where he had a private meeting with U.S. Ambassador Deane Hinton. Rosenthal denies that any U.S. government official ever pressured him to remove Bonner from El Salvador.[16] But Bonner was pulled out of Central America in August 1982, seven months after the story on El Mozote broke.

Later in 1982, a staff report by the House Intelligence Subcommittee on Oversight and Evaluation demonstrated that it was the administration's reporting on El Mozote, not the media's, that was faulty.[17] In addition to noting that "*Embassy investigators never reached the towns where the alleged events occurred*," (emphasis in original) the oversight subcommittee criticized the following:

* The Embassy cable assumed that there had been a fight rather than a massacre, but the only confirmation of this came from a man several towns away who "*intimated* that he knew of violent fighting in El Mozote and other nearby cantones." (emphasis in original)[18] In fact,

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Sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), p. 21.

[16] See Michael Massing, "About-Face on El Salvador," *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December 1983, pp. 42-49.

[17] The weaknesses in intelligence reporting on Nicaragua and El Salvador included: "suggestion of greater certainty than is warranted by the evidence; reliance on some unquestioned and sometimes contradictory assumptions; acceptance of descriptions given by the Salvadoran government when intelligence analysts recognize grounds for skepticism; and resistance to examining objectively information from non-intelligence sources -- a tendency to view such information simply as material to be countered." See Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence Subcommittee on Oversight and Evaluation, Staff Report, p. 4.

[18] *Ibid.,* pp. 18-19.

the cable quoted that man as unwilling to talk about the comportment of government forces. "This is something one should talk about in another time, in another country," he told the Embassy investigators.

* The lead sentence of the Embassy report, which seemed to blame the guerrillas for the not removing the civilians from the village, was contradicted by other information in the cable, which cited villagers as having been previously warned by the guerrillas about the impending government operation and urged to leave.[19]

* The Embassy field report "suggested *greater certainty* about whether a firefight occurred, and about the actions of the guerrillas, than was warranted by its own information." (emphasis in original) The "subtleties and uncertainties" in another report at the time were "disregarded by a State Department intelligence analyst in explaining what had happened," while the attempt to blame the guerrillas suggested "a *desire to `balance'* public reports of massacres." (emphasis in original)[20]

The Atlacatl Battalion and U.S. Policy

The history of U.S. human rights policy in El Salvador is not only one of downplaying or denying the war crimes of the Salvadoran military. U.S. officials often went one step further, asserting that the behavior of the U.S.-trained Atlacatl Battalion, in particular, was "commendable" and "professional" in its relations with the civilian population. The Atlacatl Battalion, which carried out the massacre at El Mozote, was created in early 1981 and trained by U.S. advisers drawn primarily from the Special Forces in a first effort to reorganize the Salvadoran military to wage a full-scale counterinsurgency war. By mid-1981, 1200 soldiers had begun operating as a "rapid reaction" battalion in conflictive zones, spearheading major military operations in the departments of Chalatenango, Cabañas, and Morazán.

U.S. officials have long been extremely proud of the Atlacatl Battalion's performance and have praised it throughout the history of the war. In the February 8, 1982, Senate hearings on the presidential certification on El Salvador, Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights Elliott Abrams lavished praise on the Atlacatl Battalion, saying that "the battalion to which you refer [regarding the massacre at El Mozote] has been complimented at various times in the past over its professionalism and over the command structure and the close control in which the troops are held when they go into battle."[21] In congressional testimony a few months later, a senior U.S. Defense Department official went one step further, saying that the Atlacatl had "achieved a commendable combat record not only for its tactical capability in fighting the guerrillas but also for its humane treatment of the people."[22]

That the man interviewed by the Embassy "intimated" that he knew of violent fighting, and that he had come from a town several miles away, was blacked out in the cable released under the Freedom of Information Act.

[19] *Ibid*., p. 19.

[20] *Ibid*., p. 19.

[21] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Certification Concerning Military Aid...*, p. 21.

[22] Testimony of Nestor Sanchez, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Inter-American Affairs, before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on June 2, 1982, cited in Joy Hackel & Dan Siegel, eds., *In Contempt of Congress: The Reagan Record on Central America* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies, 1987), p. 100.

This sentiment was echoed by other State Department officials. In April 1983, for example, Secretary of State George Shultz lamented the fact that only "1 Salvadoran soldier in 10" had received U.S. training and noted that the "three government battalions we have trained conduct themselves professionally, both on the battlefield and in their relations with civilians."[23] As late as 1987, Colonel John D. Waghelstein, who had served as head of the U.S. Military Group in San Salvador from 1982-1983, said the Atlacatl Battalion was "still the best unit in the country."[24]

Lieutenant Colonel Domingo Monterrosa, who commanded the Atlacatl battalion from its inception in 1981 until 1983, remains one of the most revered heroes of the Salvadoran military.[25] Monterrosa also had the respect of his U.S. military counterparts and, later, of President José Napoleón Duarte.[26] One U.S. military officer who served in El Salvador in the early 1980s praised Monterrosa's abilities: "[w]ith a hot shot strategist like Monterrosa, who I'd put up against any American hot shot, things began to happen, and it began to make a difference in the theater."[27]

Accolades for the Atlacatl unit's warfighting ability and its humane treatment of civilians notwithstanding, one can easily find a litany of massacres -- investigated by human rights groups and respected journalists in the early to mid-1980s -- committed by the Atlacatl Battalion. In addition to El Mozote, such cases include the killing of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter in November 1989, as well as the following:

* Lempa River, October 20-29, 1981: A military operation was carried out on the southeastern bank of the Lempa River in Usulután province in which the authorities claimed to have killed 132 guerrillas. The human rights group Socorro Juridico reported that the operation resulted in the murder of forty-four children, the murder and capture and of ten family groups, and the murder of thirty-three women. A total of 147 noncombatants were either killed by the armed forces or taken away by them. People in the area saw corpses floating down the river after the operation, a phenomenon that the armed forces explained by claiming that "a number of terrorists" crossing the river in boats had been sunk. According to testimony given to Socorro Juridico, the massacre involved members of the Atlacatl Battalion.[28]

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[23] Secretary of State George P. Shultz, "The Struggle for Democracy," U.S. Department of State, Current Policy Paper 478, April 1983, cited in Robert S. Leiken and Barry Rubin, eds. *The Central American Crisis Reader* (New York: Summit Books, 1987), p. 546.

[24] Max G. Manwaring and Court Prisk, eds., *El Salvador at War: An Oral History* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1988), p. 235. Following his tour of duty, Waghelstein became one of the foremost U.S. military theorists writing about the war in El Salvador.

[25] Monterrosa was killed on October 23, 1984, when the guerrillas planted explosives aboard his helicopter.

[26] José Napoleón Duarte with Diana Page, *Duarte: My Story* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1986), p. 195. Duarte wrote: "I had faith that there were officers like Monterrosa, who would realize that democracy was best for their country."

[27] Colonel John Cash, Defense Attaché in El Salvador from 1981-1983, in Manwaring and Prisk, *El Salvador at War*, p. 212.

[28] Americas Watch and the American Civil Liberties Union, *Supplement to the Report on Human Rights in El Salvador* (Washington, D.C.: Americas Watch and the Center for National Security Studies, July 20, 1982), p. 25.

* Cabañas, November, 1981: The Atlacatl Battalion conducted a military sweep in Cabañas Department in November 1981. An American graduate student doing anthropological research in the area, Philippe Bourgois, was caught up in it; he later testified before a House subcommittee about his experience:

> The evacuation route for the civilian population to Honduras was blocked by the presence of Honduran soldiers along the banks of the Lempa River, where it delineates the border between the two countries. For the next fourteen days, I fled with the local population as we were subjected to aerial bombardment, artillery fire, helicopter strafing, and attack by Salvadoran foot soldiers. In retrospect, it appears as if the Salvadoran government troops had wanted to annihilate all living creatures (human and animal) within the confines of the 30 square mile area. On the fourteenth day, when we learned that the Honduran soldiers had withdrawn from the Lempa River, I escaped with other noncombatants to the refugee camps in Honduras.

Bourgois estimated that about one thousand local residents fled and that at least fifty were killed, another fifty were wounded, and a hundred missing by the time he got out of the area on November 25. The Salvadoran press quoted Defense Minister José Guillermo García as calling the operation one of the most successful of the war.[29]

* Copapayo, November, 1983: The Atlacatl Battalion participated in a massacre in Copapayo, San Nicolás and La Escopeta. Journalists who visited the towns on November 16, 1983, were given a list of 117 people killed; according to residents of the villages, twenty women and children were taken inside a house and shot, while at least thirty were drowned when troops firing automatic weapons drove them into Lake Suchitlán. U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador Thomas Pickering later told Americas Watch that, although the exact circumstances were unclear, he was prepared to believe that "troops of the Atlacatl battalion had actually been involved in a massacre."

Subsequently, the boatman who took journalists across Lake Suchitlán to view the site was himself killed, apparently by the military. The armed men in military garb who took him from his home on November 29 reportedly told his wife it was a mistake to cooperate with journalists.[30]

* Los Llanitos, July 17-22, 1984: The episode at Los Llanitos, Cabañas, became known internationally when the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe* and the *Miami Herald* carried accounts of it on September 9, 1984. Journalists from the three papers had visited the area carrying a list, compiled by an investigator from the Archdiocese human rights office, Tutela Legal, naming sixty-eight people who had been killed there. As the *Boston Globe* reported:

> Villagers of Los Llanitos, a hamlet of 185 residents, said government troops combed the area for guerrillas three times earlier this year. But in the July campaign, villagers

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[29] *Ibid*., pp. 26-27.

[30] Americas Watch and the American Civil Liberties Union, *As Bad As Ever: A Report on Human Rights in El Salvador*, Fourth Supplement (Washington, D.C.: Americas Watch and the Center for National Security Studies, January 31, 1984), pp. 20-22.

said, the soldiers for the first time avoided open roads. Instead they scaled rocks and cut through bush and bramble to take to the hills above the hamlets before village lookouts spotted them. When word finally went out at dusk on July 18 that the "enemy" was nearby, nearly 1,000 peasants from seven hamlets grabbed their children and set out on a frantic march, stumbling in the darkness down ravines and over promontories, the villagers said. They hoped to reach the caves and gullies where they had hid safely during past incursions.

The *Globe* account went on to describe the machine-gunning of a group of thirty-six villagers and the soldiers' burning of many corpses.[31] A Salvadoran officer close the Army High Command told the *New York Times* that several units, including the Atlacatl Battalion, were involved in the operation.[32]

* Gualsinga River, August 28-30, 1984: The Atlacatl Battalion began a sweep on August 28 near Las Vueltas, Chalatenango, driving civilians from that village and the nearby villages of El Tamarindo, Hacienditas, and Leoneses. Four foreign journalists traveled to the scene a few days later. A Reuters dispatch reported:

> The villagers said they fled so fast they managed to take only the few belongings they could carry, leaving behind most of their possessions, including pets and pack animals. "When they passed through the villages they killed the horses and dogs," Mr. Cartagena [a villager] said of the soldiers.

The reporters observed a gaping hole in the roof of one house in El Tamarindo, reportedly caused by a mortar shell that residents said killed a young girl inside. They also saw the rotting remains of two horses in the village. The survivors said 300 to 400 peasants from the three villages grew weary from the six-mile walk up the steep mountain passes and settled on the bank of the Gualsinga River, just outside the hamlet of Santa Lucía.

On the morning of August 30, troops of the Atlacatl Battalion moved in by helicopter and began to cordon off the area, the villagers said. They said when they realized the army had surrounded them, they scattered in all directions. It was then, they said, that the shooting began. Many people with no place to turn jumped into the rapidly flowing river. Some, like Mr. Cartagena, survived. Many drowned. Tutela Legal said that at least fifty died and that thirty-one bodies were identified.[33]

* The Jesuit Massacre, November 16, 1989: Years after the Reagan administration ignored or denied evidence of the Atlacatl's participation in atrocities, one of its commando units carried out the cold-blooded assassination of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter on the campus of the Central American University (UCA). Members of an Atlacatl commando unit were engaged in a training exercise with members of the U.S. Special Forces when they were called in to fight during the heavy FMLN military offensive of November

[31] Americas Watch, *Draining the Sea*, Sixth Supplement to the Report on Human Rights in El Salvador (New York, Americas Watch, March 1985), pp. 4-11.

[32] James LeMoyne, "Salvadoran Villagers Report Army Massacre," *New York Times*, September 9, 1984.

[33] James LeMoyne, "Salvadoran Villagers Report Attack by the Army," *New York Times*, September 15, 1984; and Americas Watch, *Draining the Sea...* pp. 3-11.

1989. A 47-man unit was assigned to the Military School in the capital; its first action was to carry out a search of the UCA campus on November 13, and its last action before rejoining the Atlacatl was to murder the Jesuits on November 16.[34]

In September 1991, seven members of the Atlacatl commando unit stood trial for the murders of the Jesuits and the two women. All, including the self-confessed triggermen, were acquitted; in January 1992, two lieutenants and a lieutenant colonel were given three-year sentences on lesser charges.

U.S. Government Response to Massacres

The Reagan administration strongly contested accounts of massacres by the Atlacatl Battalion, frequently labeling them "FMLN propaganda." Lieutenant Colonel Domingo Monterrosa, who led the Atlacatl from 1981 to 1983, was at least honest about the fact that civilians were often killed during military operations. But he alleged that they were usually killed in crossfire rather than murdered. Six months after the massacre at El Mozote and surrounding villages, the Atlacatl and two other U.S.-trained battalions were involved in a "cleanup" operation in Chalatenango. After charges emerged that another massacre had taken place during the operation, Monterrosa gave a press conference where he said the following:

> It is natural that in these subversive redoubts the armed men are not there alone... that is to say, they need their "masses," people, women, old people, or children... they are all mixed up with the subversives themselves ... so in the clashes and in the distinct operation we carried out, it's natural that there were a series of people killed, some without weapons, including some women, and I understand, some children...[35]

When asked about this statement, the U.S. State Department supported Monterrosa's version that such deaths had occurred during "combat operations." As in the case of El Mozote, the State Department blamed the guerrillas "who routinely travel with civilian sympathizers and who usually have advance warning of impending military operations" yet "do not take adequate measures to remove their noncombatant civilians to secure areas.[36]

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[34] "Interim Report of the Speaker's Task Force on El Salvador," April 30, 1990, pp. 42-43.

Elsewhere, the Speaker's Task Force noted that "all of the soldiers charged with murdering the Jesuits, except Col. Benavides [the head of the Military Academy], received at least some U.S. training, including four who received training in the United States. Sadly, the entire unit that allegedly carried out the crimes was participating in a U.S. training exercise during the two days immediately prior to the murders." (p. 11)

[35] "U.S. Tactics Fail to Prevent Salvadoran Deaths," *Washington Post*, June 10, 1982.

[36] Americas Watch and the American Civil Liberties Union, *Second Supplement*, p. 108.

This lack of concern by U.S. officials for reports of massacres of civilians during and after military operations in the Salvadoran countryside continued for several years. On January 25, 1984, the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador attempted to explain the discrepancies between the number of civilian deaths tabulated by Tutela Legal and by the Embassy. In a cable to the State Department, the Embassy argued that many of the deaths reported by Tutela Legal actually involved supporters of the guerrillas who were "something other than innocent civilian bystanders." It called them '*masas*,' a term that the Salvadoran guerrillas used for their civilian supporters, and attempted to legitimate attacks on them by describing them as persons who "live in close proximity of and travel in the company of armed guerrillas." After a hail of criticism, the Embassy retreated, claiming that its position had been "misunderstood" and that indeed "*masas* are not an appropriate military target of and by themselves, only insofar as they may be part of a legitimate target of armed guerrillas." See Americas Watch, *El Salvador's Decade of Terror* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 53-54.

The "Official Story"

The official U.S. record of human rights violations in El Salvador -- found in the annual reports of the State Department -- reveals a history sanitized of virtually any mention of Salvadoran Army massacres in the early to mid-1980s.

In the annual human rights reports of the State Department for 1981-1984, one finds no reporting on any of the massacres listed above, including that of El Mozote. The one exception, a citation in the 1983 report, mentions the Copapayo episode as illustrative of charges levelled "against government forces [which] appear to be exaggerated, misleading or false."[37] The 1983 report does mention two mass killings of civilians, but neither of these involved deaths related to a military operation. As far as we can tell, the State Department has yet to admit that massacres of the type listed above were ever committed by Salvadoran troops. The closest it ever came to such an admission was in its 1984 report, where it stated: "*In contrast to the situation in the past*, there is no credible evidence to suggest that violence against civilians is now even tacit government policy..." (emphasis added)[38]

More typical were the public disavowals. In a February 13, 1985, appearance on ABC Television's "Nightline," Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams denied that massacres at Los Llanitos or the Gualsinga River had ever occurred and dismissed the investigative reporting carried out by prominent U.S. journalists. This contradicted even the Salvadoran government's own Human Rights Commission, which reported in 1984 that the armed forces killed 80 civilians in Cabañas in July 1984 "out of combat." The Commission's entry amounts to a Salvadoran government admission that the Army committed a massacre at Los Llanitos.

The State Department asserted in its 1984 annual report that, "as far as can be determined, the majority of alleged civilian deaths stemming from military operations were actually guerrilla combatants." In fact, the U.S. embassy had never even tried to investigate the two massacres that occurred that year, because by then U.S. personnel were prohibited from travelling in areas contested by the FMLN.

The Current Status of the Case

On October 26, 1990, Tutela Legal assisted one of the survivors, Pedro Chicas Romero, in filing a petition against the Atlacatl Battalion before the Second Court of the First Instance in San Francisco Gotera, Morazán, presided over by Judge Federico Ernesto Portillo Campos. Since then, over ten other witnesses have filed testimonies in the case.

When Tutela Legal released its report on the EL Mozote massacre on November 9, 1991, it criticized the handling of the case over the previous year by the Attorney General, the Supreme Court, and President Alfredo Cristiani. Apparently, Tutela's public criticism has had some effect, and recently the case has made some advances.

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[37] Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1983* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, February 1984), p. 553.

[38] Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1984* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, February 1985) p. 515.

Tutela Legal noted three main concerns regarding the handling of the case. One issue concerns military records. On November 9, 1990, First Instance Judge Portillo Campos sent a request to President Cristiani, in his capacity as commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces, asking that he identify which military units were operating in the vicinity of El Mozote in December 1981. On June 19, 1990, the judge again sent a request to Cristiani, this time asking for the names of commanders and other officers in charge of the military operation in the zone. The President has yet to respond to this request.

Tutela Legal also criticized the Attorney General's office, alleging that it had played a passive role and had not vigorously pressed for a full investigation, in accordance with its legal responsibilities.[39] Three attorneys from the Attorney General's Human Rights division were assigned to the case, but only one took an active role in the investigation.

The head of the Attorney General's Human Rights division, Eduardo Pineda Valenzuela, quickly rejected Tutela's charges. In a press conference on November 13, 1991, he said that the case could not advance without the physical evidence that exhumations of the victims could provide, and that the exhumations could not be carried out right away because the area where the massacres occurred was still a conflictive zone which was heavily mined. On November 25, 1991, Pineda Valenzuela gave a second press conference in which he said his office was filing a petition with the Court requesting three things:

1. That a request be made by the Court to the Ministry of Defense that the mines be removed from the area around El Mozote and the other villages involved in the massacre, so that the area would be safe for exhumations to proceed;

2. That the High Command of the Armed Forces turn over the previously requested records regarding the operations in Morazán at the time of the massacres;

3. That once the Court received assurances that the mines have been removed, that the Court reschedule the exhumations.[40]

Tutela Legal has also faulted the president of the Supreme Court, Dr. Mauricio Gutiérrez Castro, for not agreeing to the accreditation of foreign forensic anthropologists to assist in the exhumations. Tutela Legal argues that the presence of outside experts is crucial in this case, given both the number of victims and the fact that Salvadoran doctors lack sufficient training to carry out the work.[41]

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[39] Article 193, paragraphs 1, 2, and 9 of the Salvadoran Constitution spell out the Attorney General's duty to defend the interests of Salvadoran society, to defend against violations of human rights, and to direct any special entities in the investigation of a case.

[40] The excuse that the exhumations could not be carried out because of land mines does not hold up to great scrutiny. The FMLN claims that the area is not mined, something which they say they have communicated to the authorities. The military, on the other hand, says it should be the FMLN that demines the area.

[41] In November 1990, for example, Judge Portillo Campos had ordered the exhumations to be carried out by the Justice of the Peace in the town of Meanguera, who was even less likely to have the necessary professional preparation. That order was revoked on June 3, 1991.

In theory, Judge Portillo Campos himself can accredit such foreign experts, although he has been unwilling to do so without the support of the head of the Supreme Court. In early July 1991, the judge ordered the exhumations to begin on July 23, with only the assistance of forensic doctors from the Salvadoran Institute of Legal Medicine "Doctor Roberto Masferrer" and criminologists from the armed forces' Special Investigative Unit. The exhumation had to be postponed, however, at the request of the forensic doctors, who said they were too busy.

Following the release of the Tutela report, Tutela's Director, María Julia Hernández, held a series of meetings with the Institute of Legal Medicine. By early 1992, it appeared that there were no longer obstacles to receiving assistance from foreign experts. Three members of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF), which has carried out similar exhumations in such countries as Guatemala, Chile, the Philippines, and Brazil, are in El Salvador as of this writing. They will provide training for Salvadorans who will help in the exhumation, and will participate themselves in some capacity. The exhumation may begin as early as March 1992, and is expected to require from several months to a year to be properly carried out.

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