

FOR RELEASE SATURDAY MARCH 9, 1991

For Further Information

Cynthia Arnson [w] (202) 371-6592  
[h] (202) 667-5543

Juan E. Méndez [w] (202) 371-6592

In a comprehensive report released to coincide with legislative and municipal elections in El Salvador, Americas Watch concludes that despite the reductions in abuses in some categories in the second half of 1990, the human rights situation remains precarious. Recent civilian casualties stemming from a guerrilla offensive in late 1990 and political violence relating to the approaching elections make it clear that any progress in the overall human rights situation will be tenuous unless accompanied by an end to military impunity and a resolution of the conflict.

From the time the U.N.-mediated peace talks began in April 1990 through the end of the year, there was a noticeable change in the observance of human rights in El Salvador. Reported violations including disappearances, death squad killings, and deaths attributed to the armed and security forces declined as

compared to the first six months of the year, sometimes falling by as much as one half. Guerrilla violations,

including kidnappings and assassinations, remained at a constant level throughout 1990, but were fewer than the year before.

Unfortunately, this trend was reversed in early 1991, as is reflected in the killing by FMLN combatants of two wounded U.S. servicemen after their helicopter was shot down; the murder of 15 men, women and children in the town of El Zapote; the destruction of the offices and printing presses of the left-of-center daily, Diario Latino; a grenade attack on the offices of the opposition Democratic Convergence in Usulután; and the assassination of a Nationalist Democratic Union (UDN) candidate and his pregnant wife in San Salvador.

Hopes that the trend of late 1990 could be sustained are further diminished by the ongoing incapacity of the judicial system to provide justice even in those major human rights cases that have received international attention. 1990 saw major setbacks in the San Sebastián case involving the Army's murder of 10 peasants in 1988, which the United States had identified as a key test for the judicial system. And although a trial of nine defendants for the November 1989 murder of six Jesuits and their housekeeper and her daughter may take place this year, it is unlikely that those who ordered the crime will ever be brought to justice.

The FMLN also remains under intense pressure to prosecute those responsible for the murder of two U.S. servicemen after their helicopter was downed in early January. Americas Watch called on the FMLN to conduct a thorough and impartial investigation of the crime and to punish those responsible.

Among the major concerns in the report are:

- Although an impressively broad range of political parties are participating in the Legislative Assembly and municipal elections on March 10, 1991, election-related political violence is actually greater than it was immediately prior to the March 1989 presidential elections. This is true despite the fact that the FMLN has pledged to refrain from military actions that would impede the elections.

- Indiscriminate strafing, rocketing and mortaring by the Salvadoran Air Force and Army have resulted in a number of civilian casualties which could have been avoided. In recent months, indiscriminate attacks on military installations in urban areas by the FMLN, in which both manufactured and homemade mortars have fallen short of their targets, have also raised the number of civilian casualties.

- Apart from the problem of the armed forces' impunity for

human rights crimes, the FMLN needs to develop a fair system of punishment for its own forces that commit abuses.

- Members of civil defense units continue to be involved in serious human rights violations, including murder, robbery, assault, rape and abuse of authority.

- Both Salvadoran government forces and the FMLN have executed prisoners as well as those placed *hors de combat* by their wounds. While Americas Watch does not have sufficient evidence to say that either side has a policy of carrying out such executions, the number of documented cases of this particular violation of the laws of war causes serious alarm.

- Although death squad killings dropped off markedly in late 1990, for the first six months of the year they were occurring at approximately double the rate of the year before. In early 1991, death squad killings again began to rise.

- The creation of an Army human rights office in April 1990, which began to function in July, represents a potentially important step in the armed forces' acceptance of institutional responsibility for the investigation of human rights abuses and the punishment of those guilty. Thus far, however, the Army human rights office has limited itself to denouncing only FMLN abuses.

This report was prepared by Cynthia Arnson, Associate Director of Americas Watch, who has written extensively on El Salvador, and David Holiday, director of Americas Watch's San Salvador office.

Americas Watch was established in 1981 to monitor and promote internationally recognized human rights in Latin America and the Caribbean. The Chairman is Adrian DeWind; the Vice Chairmen are Peter Bell and Stephen Kass. Juan E. Méndez is Executive Director.

Americas Watch is a part of Human Rights Watch, which also includes Africa Watch, Asia Watch, Helsinki Watch and Middle East Watch. The Chairman of Human Rights Watch is Robert L. Bernstein. The Executive Director is Aryeh Neier and Kenneth Roth is Deputy Director. Holly Burkhalter is Washington Director and Susan Osnos is Press Director. Ellen Lutz is California Director and Jemera Rone is Counsel to Human Rights Watch.

Copies of the report are available from the Publications Department, Human Rights Watch, 485 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10017 for \$10.00.