

"Briefs" from Amnesty International's report "El Salvador: 'Death Squads' -- A Government Strategy" (ordering information at the end)

These brief quotes are divided into three sections which may be titled: "Who runs the 'Death Squads'"; "Who are the victims"; and "To what extent, if any, have the criminals been held accountable?"

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Who Runs the 'Death Squads'?

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"The testimony of armed forces personnel, the details of thousands of case studies and other information examined by Amnesty International lead to the conclusion that actions attributed by authorities to "death squads" are routinely carried out by regular units of the armed forces which include the military and the security services, and by special intelligence units that incorporate civilian gunmen under their supervision and control." [Conclusions, p. 44]

"Amnesty International has concluded that the Salvadoran 'death squads' are simply used to shield the government from accountability for the torture, 'disappearance' and extrajudicial executions committed in their name. The squads are made up of \*regular army and police agents\*, acting in uniform or plain clothes, \*under the orders of superior officers\*." [emphasis added]  
[Who Runs the 'Death Squads', pp. 8-9]

"The Salvadorian Government maintains that 'death squad'-style killings are the work of extremist groups beyond its control. However, there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that the squads are made up of regular troops and police -- that they form an intrinsic part of the security apparatus" [Back cover]

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Having identified the murders, torturers, and kidnapers, we may ask:

Who are the victims?

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"All sectors of Salvadorian society have been the target of 'death squad'-style killings...in a great many cases the choice of victim has been indicator of who lies behind the 'death squads'. Those targeted have been members of groups perceived to be in opposition to the government, or to represent a nucleus around whom such opposition could coalesce, including students, trade unionists, members of cooperatives, church workers and peasants." [Page 25]

[The Brigada Maximiliano Herna'ndez Martinez, Maximiliano Herna'ndez Martinez Brigade, is named after the Salvadoran general who ordered the massacre of an estimated 30,000 peasants in 1932 in the wake of an uprising (from the AI report, page 8)]

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To what extent, if any, have the criminals been held accountable?  
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"Tens of thousands of people have been the victims of extrajudicial execution and "disappearance" by El Salvador's armed forces since 1980... None of the armed forces officers responsible have been brought to justice, most remain in positions of command."  
[Conclusions, p. 44]

"Murders of tens of thousands of Salvadorian citizens have gone without even a semblance of investigation. Witnesses to abductions or killing have recorded license numbers of vans used by 'death squads'. But the authorities have then refused to make public the identity of institutions of individuals to which the vehicles were registered..." [Page 37]

Related items from "Conclusions":

"Efforts by El Salvador's independent and church-run human rights organizations to investigate these killing have been hampered by the harassment, intimidation, imprisonment, torture, mutilation, extrajudicial execution and "disappearance" of their members..."

"The military court system in El Salvador has routinely failed to prosecute military personnel accused of involvement in torture, "disappearance" and extrajudicial execution. The exclusive jurisdiction of the military courts over members of the armed forces provides a shield behind which armed forces personnel commit grave crimes with impunity."

"In exceptional cases in which military court jurisdiction has been waived - notably the murder in 1981 of two American labour advisers and their Salvadorian colleague - civilian courts have been intimidated and proceeding obstructed by lack of cooperation by the armed forces.

[See also the sections "The Courts and the Military: Obstacles to Effective Investigation" and "The Legal Framework: A Smokescreen for Official 'Death Squad' Activities"]

"Convictions of five National Guards were eventually obtained in the case of the four US churchwomen murdered in 1980, but two judges involved in the early stages of the case quit after threats to their lives. The judge who eventually heard the case suspected that his brother's murder was an attempt to warn him off, and the lawyer defending one of the convicted guardsmen later said he was forced to take part in a cover-up to prevent senior officers being indicted.

According to the lawyer's account, he was abducted by National Guardsmen in civilian clothes, tortured at National Guard headquarters and released only after pressure from the US Embassy and the ICRC. The lawyer left the country shortly afterwards and was treated in Los Angeles for broken ribs. Earlier, his brother had been arrested and brother-in-law abducted - all part, he says, of pressure to ensure his collaboration in the cover-up." p.32 (Section 4.6.5)

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[This 50 page report, with pictures (which are clearer in the Spanish edition), is only \$5 from Amnesty International, Publications, 322 Eighth Ave., New York, NY 10001. Ask for "El Salvador: 'Death Squads' -- A Government Strategy", first published in October, 1988; or call Amnesty at: (212)807-8400 (ask for "publications")]  
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