

Violence, culture of impunity still plague El Salvador

Relatives of war victims protest against retired Gen. Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova upon his arrival April 8 at El Salvador International Airport. Casanova was deported from the United States for his alleged involvement in torture and killings during the 1979-92 civil war in El Salvador. (CNS/Reuters/Jose Cabezas)

[Linda Cooper](#) and [James Hodge](#) | *May. 20, 2015*

Thirty-five years after the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero and on the eve of his beatification, El Salvador appears to be a different country.

The civil war that began with his assassination and claimed the lives of more than 70,000 people has long been over, with the military purged of its most brutal officers.

The country is bursting with pride over the upcoming beatification of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who in life had been labeled a communist by the oligarchs and was often shunned by the Vatican.

What's more, a former Marxist guerrilla elected last year is running the country, a development hard to fathom not so long ago.

Yet, the country is as deeply divided as ever. The past is ever present.

Violence is once again ubiquitous, with El Salvador ranked the second-most murderous nation in the world.

Police are talking openly of creating death squads to eliminate gangs.

Moreover, a culture of impunity has reigned for 35 years. The government has never pursued, much less prosecuted, those involved in murdering Romero on March 24, 1980.

President Salvador Sánchez Cerén does not have the political clout to fulfill a campaign promise to repeal the amnesty law that bars prosecution for war crimes committed during the 12-year conflict that ended in 1992.

Sánchez Cerén, a former commander with the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), narrowly defeated his runoff opponent, Norman Quijano, who steadfastly opposed rescinding the law.

Quijano was a candidate of the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), which had pushed the law through the Legislative Assembly in 1993. That legislative action came five days after the U.N. Truth Commission announced that the Salvadoran military and its death squads had committed 85 percent of the war's worst atrocities.

Just last year, Quijano, as mayor of San Salvador, named a city street in honor of the late Maj.

Roberto D'Aubuisson, the death squad leader who ordered Romero's assassination and whom former U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador Robert White called a "pathological killer."

D'Aubuisson was the founder of the ARENA party, whose members just won the highest number of seats in the legislature. In honoring D'Aubuisson, Quijano said that it had never been proven in court that he was responsible for Romero's death. Quijano failed to mention that the trial judge originally assigned to investigate the murder fled the country after getting death threats.

The street controversy was put to rest on May 1 when the newly elected Mayor Najib Bukele quickly returned the street to its original name before Romero's beatification takes place May 23.

The fact that hundreds of war criminals are still walking free throughout the country is not so easily solved, given the polarization in the country.

Last month, Amnesty International called the amnesty law "an affront" to the thousands of victims and the families of those who were tortured, raped, killed and disappeared during the war.

It also said that the recent deportation of Gen. Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova back to El Salvador is an opportunity for the country "to investigate cases of grave human rights violations."

A U.S. immigration appeals court found that Vides Casanova, former defense minister, had covered up torture and murder by his troops, including the 1980 murders of four U.S. churchwomen and the torture of Dr. Juan Romagoza, who had been repeatedly shocked, sexually assaulted with a stick and hung from a ceiling.

In its ruling, the court upheld the principle of "command responsibility," saying that Vides Casanova knew about the abuses but didn't hold the perpetrators accountable.

Vides Casanova, who had been living in Florida for 25 years, had been a close ally of the United States, received two Legion of Merit awards, and was a CIA collaborator. Like D'Aubuisson, he was a graduate of

the U.S. Army's School of the Americas, now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC).

Also walking free are more than two dozen former officers implicated by the U.N. Truth Commission in the 1989 massacre in which six Jesuit priests, their cook and her daughter were executed at Central American University with high-powered assault rifles.

However, one of the participants, 22 of whom were graduates of the U.S. Army's School of the Americas, may be facing justice -- in Spain. [A U.S. federal court is now considering](#) whether to extradite Col. Inocente Orlando Montano Morales to Spain to stand trial in the Jesuit case.

Montano, who falsified immigration documents to enter the U.S. in 2002, was one of the military high command who plotted the murders of the priests, five of whom were Spanish nationals.

The Constitutional Chamber of the Salvadoran Supreme Court has yet to rule on a lawsuit challenging the amnesty law, filed by Central American University's Human Rights Institute and other groups.

In October 2013, just a month after the Supreme Court accepted the suit, San Salvador Archbishop José Luis Escobar abruptly closed the highly respected archdiocesan human rights office, Tutela Legal, which had been opened by Romero. The office had evidence on thousands of unresolved killings and atrocities.

Tutela Legal records, in part, had prompted the Inter-American Court of Human Rights to order El Salvador to investigate and prosecute the 1981 El Mozote massacre, in which more than 900 men, women and children were killed by troops armed, trained and advised by the U.S. Army. The atrocity, the court said, is not subject to amnesty, being an internationally recognized crime against humanity.

Evidence obtained by Tutela Legal showed that when a soldier objected to killing children, Maj. Natividad de Jesús Cáceres Cabrera threw a baby into the air and impaled it on his bayonet. All of the children were then slaughtered.

Forensic experts later found that of 143 skeletal remains that could be identified from one building, 131 were children, their average age being 6 years. Of the 184 cartridge cases with discernable head stamps, all were manufactured in Lake City, Mo., according to the U.N. Truth Commission, which cited 12 Salvadoran officers for the massacre, the largest in recent Latin American history. Ten of the 12 were graduates of the School of the Americas, including Cáceres Cabrera.

Scores of infants were cut to pieces with machetes in the 1980 Rio Sumpul massacre, in which 600 people were butchered trying to flee the country. The U.N. cited two officers for having command responsibility for the operation; both were School of the Americas graduates.

In March, Roy Bourgeois, founder of SOA Watch and a former Maryknoll priest, led a delegation to El Salvador to ask the country to stop sending soldiers to WHINSEC, which is now the name of the School of the Americas. Meeting with Sánchez Cerén, Bourgeois said, the delegation "learned that he's well-meaning, but lacks the power to repeal the amnesty law. Or to stop the military from sending officers to the School of the Americas, which has caused so much suffering in the country."

Complicating matters is the increasing gang violence. Last month, Inter Press Service reported that police are openly talking about creating death squads to eliminate gangs, while members of the legislature are discussing declaring a state of siege in violent crime areas and creating rapid-response battalions to combat gangs.

Such battalions were the ones that committed massacres like El Mozote. The last state of siege was declared in November 1989, when the rapid-response Atlacatl Battalion assassinated the six Jesuit priests during a guerrilla offensive.

Meanwhile, the United States -- in addition to training the country's military -- is dangling in front of El Salvador and other Central American countries a \$1 billion carrot. Earlier this year, Vice President Joseph Biden claimed that the so-called "Plan for Central America" would help "leaders make the difficult reforms and investments required to address the region's interlocking security, governance and economic challenges." Human rights groups have opposed the package, given the rampant reports of human rights abuses by police and military forces and the failure of authorities to prosecute them.

Bourgeois said that Sánchez Cerén is acting cautiously, ever mindful that the Obama administration did nothing to prevent a coup in Honduras in 2009 and continued to train Honduran soldiers at WHINSEC despite a federal law that forbids aid and training to a country undergoing a military coup. Still, Bourgeois believes that if Romero were alive today, he would tell Biden what he told President Jimmy Carter in February 1980: "Do not give us any more of that military aid and training. What the Salvadoran people need are schools, hospitals, medicines."

[Linda Cooper and James Hodge are the authors of *Disturbing the Peace: The Story of Father Roy Bourgeois and the Movement to Close the School of the Americas*.]