

**Promoting Human Rights and Healing in the Wake of Civil War in El Salvador  
Task Force 2015**

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## **Introduction**

During winter quarter of 2015, this task force within the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington set out to document the story of two civil war era massacres in El Salvador; Las Canoas and La Quesera. In collaboration with Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, a local NGO based out of El Salvador, the Unfinished Sentences, the University of Washington's Human Rights Center's branch for El Salvador, and under the instruction of Task Force Instructor Professor Angelina Godoy and Graduate Assistant Alex Montalvo, a team of ten undergraduate students conducted vigorous research on the two massacres and the context. The team traveled to El Salvador for eight days of intensive primary research and video documentation surrounding the stories of seven survivors of these two massacres. Along with the first-ever official documentation of these atrocities, this task force has produced two short videos, both of which document the stories of survivors and their search for their forcibly disappeared family members, as well as Asociación Pro-Búsqueda's work to help reunite these families. The following is the written documentation of these massacres.

## The Forced Disappearance of Children during the Salvadoran Civil War

Throughout the Salvadoran civil war, thousands of children were forcibly disappeared by agents of the Salvadoran state. Many were deliberately seized from their families; others were separated in the context of an invasion, taken into custody by troops, and then handed over to other institutions. Yet, it is clear that this was a deliberate component of the state's counterinsurgency strategy, far from an isolated practice. The Salvadoran government used child disappearances and other human rights violations as a tactic of terror to instill fear in the people.<sup>12</sup> According to Rafael Calles, the investigations coordinator for Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, abducting children was a way of easing the consciences of the troops, as it was demoralizing to kill children and safer to have children on the side of the government than the guerrillas.<sup>3</sup> Because of this, many children were demanded to be handed over or taken away forcibly by military officers, while other children were lost when their family members were killed or disappeared.<sup>4</sup>

In an effort to pull the children away from their allegedly communist parents, the military often times handed them over to the Red Cross after kidnapping the children.<sup>5</sup> The Red Cross would then place these children in orphanages or other care arrangements.<sup>6</sup> These care

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Briggs, *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012): 161

<sup>2</sup> United States Department of Justice Executive Office for Immigration Review; Immigration Court Miami, Florida. In the matter of: Jose Guillermo Garcia-Merino, Removal proceedings. Expert Report of Professor Terry L. Karl.

<sup>3</sup> Steve Fainaru, "A Country Awakes to the Reality of its 'Disappeared' Children," *Boston Globe*, July 14, 1996, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/290790802/1C3A9B4BBA794210PQ/4?accountid=14784>.

<sup>4</sup> "PHR Attends Reunion of Family Separated by Civil War in El Salvador," *Physicians for Human Rights*, n.d., <http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/press/press-releases/news-2007-04-04.html>; "Reuniting Families Separated by War," *Physicians for Human Rights*, n.d., <http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/about/impact/reuniting-families-separated-by-war.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Judith L. Gibbons and Karen Smith. Rotabi, *Intercountry adoption: policies, practices, and outcomes* (Farnham; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012): 304

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

arrangements included being raised in a state or privately run residential institution, being adopted through illegal agreements by an adoptive family in El Salvador, being taken to a military base where they were trained as “assistants”<sup>7</sup> or soldiers, or being adopted internationally.<sup>8</sup>

About fifty organizations operated to take care of these placements during the civil war, without effective government supervision.<sup>9</sup> For example, San José de la Montana, a Catholic seminary in San Salvador, housed approximately 1,000 adults and children “displaced” from rural areas.<sup>10</sup> These people lived together in large communal tin buildings and shacks characterized by poor sanitation and shortage of basic resources like food due to overcrowding.<sup>11</sup>

Abducted children who were labeled as orphans were immediately placed in Child Protective Centers “to locate the family and relatives during a stipulated period of time,”<sup>12</sup> after which they became eligible to be considered for adoption. Yet, the majority of these children had been falsely labeled as “orphans” so that they could be sent to “fattening up” centers and placed with families abroad, especially in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Many of these children did not have personal documents, such as birth certificates, so they were registered with false identities that

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<sup>7</sup> Steve Fainaru, "A Country Awakes to the Reality of it's 'Disappeared' Children," *Boston Globe*, July 14, 1996, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/290790802/1C3A9B4BBA794210PQ/4?accountid=14784>.

<sup>8</sup> Judith L. Gibbons and Karen Smith. Rotabi, *Intercountry adoption: policies, practices, and outcomes* (Farnham; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012).; Karen Smith Rotabi. 2014. "Child adoption and war: 'Living disappeared' children and the social worker's post-conflict role in El Salvador and Argentina." *International Social Work* 57, no. 2: 169-180.

<sup>9</sup> Judith L. Gibbons and Karen Smith. Rotabi, *Intercountry adoption: policies, practices, and outcomes* (Farnham; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012).; Christine Lagstom, “The Disappeared Children of El Salvador—a field study of truth, justice and reparation” (Master thesis, University of Lund, 2005), 24.

<sup>10</sup> Carmen Elena Ayala Canales, “The Impact of El Salvador’s Civil War on Orphan and Refugee Children” (Thesis, University of California Davis, 1982).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>United States Department of Justice Executive Office for Immigration Review; Immigration Court Miami, Florida. In the matter of: Jose Guillermo García-Merino, Removal proceedings. Expert Report of Professor Terry L. Karl.

eradicating the child's identity and rights to their biological family.<sup>14</sup> Originally, creating false documentation was to allow children to have access to health care and schooling, but it soon became an instrument for child trafficking as corrupt lawyers, military institutions, and government officials falsified documents to allow the abduction and trafficking of children for transnational adoptions.<sup>15</sup> These children received new birth dates, birth places, and parents' names, which not only allowed well-meaning Americans and Europeans to adopt Salvadoran children whose backgrounds were never adequately checked<sup>16</sup> but complicates the search for them today.<sup>17</sup> Many trafficked children were told that their families had abandoned them to join the guerrilla, making them feel unwanted.<sup>18</sup> This dissolved many adopted children's desire to find their birth families, who are still desperately searching for their children, hindering potential reunification of many families.<sup>19</sup>

During this time, adoption was privatized between the United States and Latin America, while the absence of agencies opened doors to profit making.<sup>20</sup> Evidence has shown that some lawyers have charged up to \$20,000 for the adoption of a child,<sup>21</sup> an exceptionally high amount

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<sup>14</sup> Christine Lagstom, "The Disappeared Children of El Salvador—a field study of truth, justice and reparation" (Master thesis, University of Lund, 2005), 24.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Steve Fainaru, "A Country Awakes to the Reality of its 'Disappeared' Children," *Boston Globe*, July 14, 1996, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/290790802/1C3A9B4BBA794210PQ/4?accountid=14784>.

<sup>17</sup> Christine Lagstom, "The Disappeared Children of El Salvador—a field study of truth, justice and reparation" (Master thesis, University of Lund, 2005), 24.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Laura Briggs, *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012): 162; Christine Lagstom, "The Disappeared Children of El Salvador—a field study of truth, justice and reparation" (Master thesis, University of Lund, 2005), 24.

<sup>21</sup> United States Department of Justice Executive Office for Immigration Review; Immigration Court Miami, Florida. In the matter of: Jose Guillermo García-Merino, Removal proceedings. Expert Report of Professor Terry L. Karl.; Steve Fainaru, "A Country Awakes to the Reality of its 'Disappeared' Children," *Boston Globe*, July 14, 1996, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/290790802/1C3A9B4BBA794210PQ/4?accountid=14784>.

of money in the extreme poverty of El Salvador.<sup>22</sup> Prior to the 1950's, unaccompanied children were admitted to the United States with refugee visas, but as the CIA and US military became more involved in the proxy wars throughout Latin America, the US State Department increasingly made visas available to "orphans."<sup>23</sup> Orphans were defined as children whose parents had died, abandoned, or relinquished them, which was easy to prove with the use of falsified documentation.<sup>24</sup> By removing the question of refugee status of the children with a technical definition for "orphan", the US State Department emptied the question of visas for adoptees of most of its political content.<sup>25</sup>

Approximately 2,354 Salvadoran children were adopted into the United States during the Salvadoran Civil War.<sup>26</sup> Between 1973 and 1983, the number of intercountry adoptions to the United States doubled, with the majority of children coming from Latin American countries like El Salvador.<sup>27</sup>

Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, a Salvadoran NGO, has been working to reunite families that were separated during the civil war. It has found Salvadoran children all over the world,

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<sup>22</sup> Judith L. Gibbons and Karen Smith. Rotabi, *Intercountry adoption: policies, practices, and outcomes* (Farnham; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Laura Briggs, *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>24</sup> Laura Briggs, *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012).; Judith L. Gibbons and Karen Smith. Rotabi, *Intercountry adoption: policies, practices, and outcomes* (Farnham; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Laura Briggs, *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012): 161

<sup>26</sup> "Reuniting Families Separated by War," *Physicians for Human Rights*, n.d., <http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/about/impact/reuniting-families-separated-by-war.html>.; "U.S. Team Transfers DNA Database to Salvadoran Group Searching for Children Who Disappeared in Civil War," accessed January 21, 2015, <http://poundpuplegacy.org/node/29687>.; Steve Fainaru, "A Country Awakes to the Reality of it's 'Disappeared' Children," *Boston Globe*, July 14, 1996, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/290790802/1C3A9B4BBA794210PQ/4?accountid=14784>.

<sup>27</sup> Laura Briggs, *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012): 161



successfully reuniting over 200 families,<sup>28</sup> but many unsolved cases remain. Below is a brief overview of their endeavors.

### **Asociación Pro-Búsqueda**

- Although the United Nations sponsored a Truth Commission to decipher the chaos of the Salvadoran Civil War, only a fraction of victims were heard. In 1993, a Jesuit priest named Jon Cortina published the testimonies of five mothers who saw their children be carried off by the military, but none of these stories were included in the UN Truth Commission.<sup>29</sup> Seeing this, Cortina established Asociación Pro-Búsqueda de Niñas y Niños Desaparecidos in August 1994.
- March 1st, 2005: Pro-Búsqueda won a case at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. The court condemned the Salvadoran government in the case of the Serrano Cruz sisters, who were kidnapped at gunpoint and never seen again. In its defense, the Salvadoran government had suggested that the girls never existed.<sup>30</sup>
- 2007: Pro-Búsqueda accompanied families of fourteen disappeared children before the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice to make eleven claims of Habeas Corpus to investigate the fate of their children. The Supreme Court favorably resolved four of the eleven demands, recognizing habeas corpus as a legal mechanism applicable to the forced disappearance of persons. However, investigations have been ineffective as they did not identify those responsible for the acts, much less to provide the whereabouts of any of the disappeared children.<sup>31</sup>
- October 2010: Pro-Búsqueda helped families present two pieces of correspondence to the Committee on Justice and Human Rights of the Legislative Assembly so it could advise the Attorney General of the Republic on its obligation to fulfill its obligation to investigate the disappearances.<sup>32</sup>
- As of March 2015, Pro-Búsqueda has received 934 missing children reports; more than 200 have reunited with their biological families, over 100 have been located, and 55 have resulted in a conclusion that the child died.<sup>33</sup> This leaves about 580 cases unresolved, or approximately 62% of the Salvadoran children reported disappeared.

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<sup>28</sup> Interviewee Eduardo García, Interview by Alex Montalvo, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 18, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Laura Briggs, *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012): 174

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 177-8

<sup>31</sup> Asociación Pro- Búsqueda, "Victimas demandan investigar desapariciones durante la Masacre de La Quesera," accessed January 8, 2015.

<http://www.probusqueda.org.sv/victimas-demandan-investigar-a-la-fiscalia-general-de-la-republica-el-paradero-de-los-ninos-y-ninas-desaparecidos-durante-la-masacre-de-la-quesera/>.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Interviewee Eduardo García, Interview by Alex Montalvo, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 18, 2015.

## US Involvement in the Salvadoran civil war: Timeline of 1980-1982

The US government provided substantial assistance to the government of El Salvador, sending at least \$4 billion in aid during the civil war that spanned from 1980 to 1992.<sup>34</sup> This occurred despite the widespread commission of atrocities by the Salvadoran military and security forces. Many of these abuses were downplayed or denied by the US government. This practice has its roots in the fact that the US Congress had tied military aid to human rights improvements, thus compelling the administration to deny the existence of abuses in order to maintain a flow of US assistance.<sup>35</sup>

Not all abuses were carried out by state forces. Shadowy death squads used techniques such as smoked-glass windows and vehicles without license plates to seize, interrogate, and torture people who had 'undesirable' political views.<sup>36</sup> These death squads operated in a "systematic and organized manner" between 1980 and 1991, while the "clandestine nature" of death squad activity allowed state responsibility to remain hidden.<sup>37</sup> US officials during this time insisted that death squads were "independent, rogue bands" that had no connection to the armed forces and government.<sup>38</sup> However, Amnesty International found that "[i]n the early 1980s, members of the security forces repeatedly violated the human rights of their fellow citizens and were unquestionably involved in widespread death squad activities."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Americas Watch Committee. *El Salvador's Decade of Terror: Human Rights Since The Assassination of Archbishop Romero* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991): 141.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 125.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 20-24.

<sup>37</sup> Cynthia Arnson, David Holiday, and Lisa Edwards. "El Salvador: Accountability and Human Rights: The Report of the United Nations Commission on the Truth for El Salvador." Edited by Juan Méndez. *Americas Watch* 5, no. 7 (1993).

<sup>38</sup> Amnesty International U.S.A, "Testimony on El Salvador," to The Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the U.S. House of Representatives, Hearings on March 5 & 11, 1981: 146.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

The Atlacatl Battalion was one of five elite rapid-response battalions created and specifically trained by US advisers who were drawn primarily from the Special Forces.<sup>40</sup> It was one of the most notorious violators of human rights throughout the armed conflict,<sup>41</sup> though its troops often worked in coordination with other units.

The Salvadoran armed conflict was characterized by multiple phases, but the darkest period was the initial two years, in terms of the systematic and seemingly unrelenting commission of human rights atrocities. Below is a timeline of the US involvement in El Salvador during this time, when the massacres at Las Canoas and La Quesera occurred and the number of political killings reached a peak.<sup>42</sup>

## 1980

- October 8: A US State Department official states that the United States has begun to train military officers in El Salvador in a program emphasizing the observance of human rights.<sup>43</sup> It is later found that the School of the Americas, a US government-funded school previously located in Panama, is moved to Fort Benning, Georgia, where more than 60,000 Latin American soldiers and policemen are trained.<sup>44</sup> Two-thirds of those named in the UN Truth Commission report for El Salvador for having committed the worst atrocities during the civil war are graduates of the School of the Americas.<sup>45</sup> The school uses US Army intelligence manuals, which advocates executions, torture, blackmail, and other forms of coercion against insurgents, to train Latin American military officers and

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<sup>40</sup> Americas Watch Committee, "El Salvador The Massacre at El Mozote: The Need to Remember," *News from Americas Watch* 4, no. 2 (1992): 12, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/e/elsalvdr/elsalv923.pdf>.

<sup>41</sup> Responsible for the most infamous massacre in El Salvador, the El Mozote Massacre, which resulted in over 1,000 deaths

<sup>42</sup> Americas Watch Committee. *El Salvador's Decade of Terror: Human Rights Since The Assassination of Archbishop Romero* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

<sup>43</sup> "U.S. Training Salvadoran Officers in a Program Stressing Human Rights," accessed January 21, 2015, <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9E00E2D81F3BE732A2575AC0A9669D94619FD6CF>.

<sup>44</sup> George Monbiot, "Backyard Terrorism," *The Guardian*, October 29, 2001, [http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/30/afghanistan\\_terrorism19](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/30/afghanistan_terrorism19); Dana Priest, "U.S. Instructed Latins On Executions, Torture; Manuals Used 1982-91, Pentagon Reveals," *The Washington Post*, September 21, 1996, <http://www.lexisnexis.com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/hottopics/lnacademic/?verb=sr&csi=8075>.

<sup>45</sup> George Monbiot, "Backyard Terrorism," *The Guardian*, October 29, 2001, [http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/30/afghanistan\\_terrorism19](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/30/afghanistan_terrorism19).

to distribute to thousands of military officers from 11 South and Central American countries, including El Salvador.<sup>46</sup>

- October 8: The massacre at Las Canoas occurs, resulting in the death of 23 people,<sup>47</sup> and at least 2 cases of child disappearances. These 2 children were found in the US, and reunification with their mother is planned in June 2015.
- December 2: Four US churchwomen are picked up, sexually abused, and killed by National Guardsmen after leaving the airport, and US suspends its military and economic aid when their bodies are discovered.<sup>48</sup>
- December 17: The Carter Administration claims that the Salvadoran government is investigating on the murder of the churchwomen and restores US economic aid.<sup>49</sup>
- US State Department replies to concerns raised by Amnesty International to the Carter administration about the US role in alleged human rights violations, in which the department states that assistance is aimed at enhancing the professionalism of the armed forces.<sup>50</sup>
- In this year of the massacre of Las Canoas, the Carter administration gives El Salvador fifteen million dollars in war-related aid.<sup>51</sup>

## 1981

- January 14: In response to the increasing guerrilla offensive, President Carter restores military aid.<sup>52</sup> Five days later, he invokes special executive authority to send \$5 million in emergency military aid to El Salvador.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Dana Priest, "U.S. Instructed Latins On Executions, Torture; Manuals Used 1982-91, Pentagon Reveals," *The Washington Post*, September 21, 1996,

<http://www.lexisnexis.com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/hottopics/lnacademic/?verb=sr&csi=8075>.

<sup>47</sup> Juan Carlos Barahona, "Familiares de Víctimas de Conflicto Armado Denuncian a FGR En Santa Ana," *La Prensa Gráfica*, October 8, 2010,

<http://www.laprensagrafica.com/el-salvador/lodeldia/145655-familiares-de-victimas-de-conflicto-armado-denuncian-a-fgr-en-santa-ana>;

Gloria Morán, "Masacre de Las Canoas, Doble Dolor," *Diario Digital ContraPunto, El Salvador, Central American*, November 24, 2012, <http://www.contrapunto.com.sv/ddhh/masacre-de-las-canoas-doble-dolor>;

Beatriz Castillo, "El Salvador: Familiares de La Masacre de Santa Ana Piden La Entrega de Los Restos Óseos," *El Ututo*, December 6, 2012. <http://elututopolitico.blogspot.com/2012/12/el-salvador-familiares-de-la-masacre-de.html>;

Interviewee Lorenzo M Zamora, Interview by Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, El Salvador.

<sup>48</sup> Americas Watch Committee. *El Salvador's Decade of Terror: Human Rights Since The Assassination of Archbishop Romero* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991): 144.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Amnesty International. "Annual Report, Amnesty International, 1981: El Salvador" in *El Salvador Packet*. 1982, 141.

<sup>51</sup> Lungo, Mario, and Arthur Schmidt. *El Salvador in the Eighties: Counterinsurgency and Revolution*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. 18.

<sup>52</sup> Americas Watch Committee. *El Salvador's Decade of Terror: Human Rights Since The Assassination of Archbishop Romero* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991): 145.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

- March 2: The State Department announces \$20 million in emergency funds for El Salvador as well as 500-lb bombs, grenade launchers, helicopter gunships, fragmentation grenades, and mortars.<sup>54</sup>
- May 11: Amnesty International's Secretary General Thomas Hammarberg writes to US Secretary of State Alexander Haig, saying that the recent US aid to El Salvador will likely support the continuation of human rights abuses, noting specific incidents of abuse of various populations. The letter urges U.S. government to end military assistance to the junta currently in power, since the funds are fueling human rights abuses. It also urges the government to increase transparency and publicize clear evidence that the aid is not being used to contribute to such abuses.<sup>55</sup> Despite this warning, the letter sent to Amnesty International from Clark only focuses on the US perspective and hence fails to provide a legitimate reason for continuing aid to El Salvador.<sup>56</sup>
- October 17: Days prior to the start of the La Quesera massacre, two majors of the US Army Corps of Engineers, one US military advisor and a US civilian engineer with the Agency for International Development, fly into the area via helicopter to inspect bridge damage.<sup>57</sup> While aboard the helicopter, they witness the Salvadoran pilot opening fire on a group of Salvadoran peasants. The Salvadoran military later claims that the helicopter was shot at from the ground,<sup>58</sup> but the two US officers on board claim that there was no ground fire.<sup>59</sup> The US embassy says that the Defense Ministry is holding the pilot who is accused for shooting civilians.<sup>60</sup>
- October 20: The La Quesera massacre occurs, resulting in 350 to 500 deaths<sup>61</sup> and disappearance of twenty-four children and thirty-six women.<sup>62</sup> The Atlacatl Battalion is one of the perpetrators of the massacre that lasts approximately ten days.
- December 11: The El Mozote Massacre results in the death of about one thousand civilians at the hands of the Atlacatl Battalion over the course of approximately ten days.<sup>63</sup> The vast majority of bullet casings found at the exhumation of the massacre has

<sup>54</sup> Roberto Alvarez et al., "A Report on Human Rights in El Salvador", 194.

<sup>55</sup> Amnesty International, "Letter to US Secretary of State Alexander Haig on Possible Impact of United States Military Assistance to El Salvador on AI Concerns in that Country," *El Salvador Packet*, May 11, 1981.

<sup>56</sup> Roberto Alvarez et al., "A Report on Human Rights in El Salvador", 195.

<sup>57</sup> "Oro Bridge Destruction Operation Described," Managua Barricada, November 23 1981; De la Locura a la Esperanza: La Guerra de los Doce Años en El Salvador: Informe de la Comisión de la Verdad para El Salvador", Editorial Universitaria, Universidad de El Salvador, San Salvador, Mayo de 1993.

<sup>58</sup> James Nelson Goodsell, "Guerrillas Push Central American Countries into Military Cooperation," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 5 1981.

<sup>59</sup> Helicopter Incident". *Confidential Department of State telegram*. October 22, 1981.

<sup>60</sup> "Salvadoran Commandos Launch Major Offensive," *Globe and Mail*, October 29 1981.

<sup>61</sup> United States Department of Justice Executive Office for Immigration Review; Immigration Court Miami, Florida. In the matter of: Jose Guillermo García-Merino, Removal proceedings. Expert Report of Professor Terry L. Karl.; Tutela Legal del Arzobispado. Comisión Arquidiocesana de Justicia y Paz. (San Salvador: 2006), 4.

<sup>62</sup> "Solidaridad Boletín Internacional," Socorro Jurídico Del Arzobispado, November 30, 1981.

<sup>63</sup> Americas Watch Committee. *El Salvador's Decade of Terror: Human Rights Since The Assassination of Archbishop Romero* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991): 49.

markings indicating that they are manufactured in the United States, revealing the country's involvement in providing weapons to the Battalion.<sup>64</sup>

- The US Embassy releases a document that cites a decrease in the number of people subjected to political murders from 1980 to 1981 as an indication of a downward trend of political violence. In fact, the violence has shifted from San Salvador, where detailed reports are made, into the countryside, where reports are often absent. Reports to the State Department from the US Embassy acknowledge these discrepancies. However, they are omitted from the US country reports of El Salvador when claims of decreased violence are made.<sup>65</sup>

## 1982

- January 28: The Reagan Administration certifies that El Salvador has complied with human rights conditions and is therefore qualified to receive military aid.<sup>66</sup>
- July 27th: The Reagan administration re-certifies El Salvador's compliance with human rights conditions and continues military assistance, but this certification is vetoed the following year.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> "El Salvador Accountability and Human Rights: The Report of the United Nations Commission on the Truth for El Salvador" 5, no. 7 (August 10, 1993), <http://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/pdfs/e/elsalvdr/elsalv938.pdf>: 18

<sup>65</sup> Americas Watch, Helsinki Watch, Lawyers Committee for International Human Rights "A Critique of the Department of State's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1981" (1982): 11-12.

<sup>66</sup> Americas Watch Committee. *El Salvador's Decade of Terror: Human Rights Since The Assassination of Archbishop Romero* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991): 146-7.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

## The Massacre at Las Canoas

The hamlet of Las Canoas is in the village of El Pinalito, or Finca de Pinalito, 15 kilometers from the city of Santa Ana.<sup>68</sup> On October 8th, 1980, at this peaceful, remote area, a group of about twenty armed men from the National Guard, Salvadoran Army, and government sympathizers<sup>69</sup> attacked a house where 70-80 people had gathered to distribute food and clothes.<sup>70</sup> Twenty-three<sup>71</sup> people were reported dead in the aftermath; ten women, nine men, and four who are still unidentified.<sup>72</sup> Four women and seven children were reported injured,<sup>73</sup> and at least two cases of child disappearances have been documented.<sup>74</sup>

In 2007, the Instituto de Medicina Legal in Santa Ana undertook an exhumation of the massacre site.<sup>75</sup> However, as of 2015, the remains have yet to be returned<sup>76</sup> to their families for reburial, becoming a source of great consternation in the community.<sup>77</sup> The Instituto de Medicina

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<sup>68</sup> Interviewee Lorenzo M Zamora, Interview by Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, El Salvador.; Gloria Morán, "Masacre de Las Canoas, Doble Dolor," *Diario Digital ContraPunto, El Salvador, Central American*, November 24, 2012, <http://www.contrapunto.com.sv/ddhh/masacre-de-las-canoas-doble-dolor>

<sup>69</sup> Centro Para La Promoción De Los Derechos Humanos "Madeleine Lagadec", "Restos óseos de los víctimas de la masacre de Canoas" (lecture, Pro-Búsqueda, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 16, 2015).

<sup>70</sup> Interviewee Lorenzo M Zamora, Interview by Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, El Salvador.

<sup>71</sup> Juan Carlos Barahona, "Familiares de Víctimas de Conflicto Armado Denuncian a FGR En Santa Ana," *La Prensa Gráfica*, October 8, 2010,

<http://www.laprensagrafica.com/el-salvador/lodeldia/145655-familiares-de-victimas-de-conflicto-armado-denuncian-a-fgr-en-santa-ana>; Gloria Morán, "Masacre de Las Canoas, Doble Dolor," *Diario Digital ContraPunto, El Salvador, Central American*, November 24, 2012, <http://www.contrapunto.com.sv/ddhh/masacre-de-las-canoas-doble-dolor>; Beatriz, Castillo, "El Salvador: Familiares de La Masacre de Santa Ana Piden La Entrega de Los Restos Óseos," *El Ututo*, December 6, 2012. <http://elututopolitico.blogspot.com/2012/12/el-salvador-familiares-de-la-masacre-de.html>; Interviewee Lorenzo M Zamora, Interview by Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, El Salvador.

<sup>72</sup> Centro Para La Promoción De Los Derechos Humanos "Madeleine Lagadec", "Restos óseos de los víctimas de la masacre de Canoas" (lecture, Pro-Búsqueda, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 16, 2015).

<sup>73</sup> Interviewee Lorenzo M Zamora, Interview by Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, El Salvador.

<sup>74</sup> Centro Para La Promoción De Los Derechos Humanos "Madeleine Lagadec", "Restos óseos de los víctimas de la masacre de Canoas" (lecture, Pro-Búsqueda, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 16, 2015).

<sup>75</sup> Gloria Morán, "Masacre de Las Canoas, Doble Dolor," *Diario Digital ContraPunto, El Salvador, Central American*, November 24, 2012, <http://www.contrapunto.com.sv/ddhh/masacre-de-las-canoas-doble-dolor>

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> "Parientes de Víctimas Demandan a La Fiscalía," accessed January 8, 2015, <http://www.laprensagrafica.com/el-salvador/departamentos/145679-parientes-de-victimas-demandan-a-la-fiscalia>; Gloria Morán, "Masacre de Las Canoas, Doble Dolor," *Diario Digital ContraPunto, El Salvador, Central American*, November 24, 2012, <http://www.contrapunto.com.sv/ddhh/masacre-de-las-canoas-doble-dolor>; Juan Carlos Barahona,

Legal de Santa Ana claims that it is unable to extract and analyze the DNA samples since the remains are more than 32 years old.<sup>78</sup> The survivors cannot afford to send the samples to an independent institution to test; nonprofit organizations, including the well-known Argentine forensic team, have been unwilling to analyze them because the initial exhumation was conducted by the Instituto de Medicina Legal.<sup>79</sup> The current state of the remains, after having undergone several tests, is unknown.<sup>80</sup>

This report is an attempt to document the tragedy that occurred in Las Canoas in 1980. Information is drawn from testimonies of survivors, newspaper articles, declassified United States documents, other government documents, and reports from human rights organizations.

## **Context**

At the time of the massacre, most people in the Las Canoas area dedicated themselves to agriculture, especially the cultivation of apples, corn, and beans.<sup>81</sup> Like many rural communities,<sup>82</sup> peasants in the region had long-standing demands for land and credit.<sup>83</sup> Lorenzo Medina Zamora, a community leader in Las Canoas, noted that the problem was not that there was no land to work, but rather that the peasants were marginalized by the government. He said that the

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“Familiars de Víctimas de Conflicto Armado Denuncian a FGR En Santa Ana,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, October 8, 2010, <http://www.laprensagrafica.com/el-salvador/lodeldia/145655-familiars-de-victimas-de-conflicto-armado-denuncian-a-fgr-en-santa-ana>.

<sup>78</sup> Beatriz, Castillo, “El Salvador: Familiares de La Masacre de Santa Ana Piden La Entrega de Los Restos Óseos,” *El Ututo*, December 6, 2012. <http://elututopolitico.blogspot.com/2012/12/el-salvador-familiars-de-la-masacre-de.html>; Centro Para La Promoción De Los Derechos Humanos “Madeleine Lagadec”, “Restos óseos de los víctimas de la masacre de Canoas” (lecture, Pro-Búsqueda, San Salvador, El Salvador,, February 16, 2015).

<sup>79</sup> Centro Para La Promoción De Los Derechos Humanos “Madeleine Lagadec”, “Restos óseos de los víctimas de la masacre de Canoas” (lecture, Pro-Búsqueda, San Salvador, El Salvador,, February 16, 2015).

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Interviewee Lorenzo M Zamora, Interview by Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, El Salvador.

<sup>82</sup> At this point in the early 1980’s, due in part to El Salvador’s lack of natural resources and foreign investment, the country’s economy remained overwhelmingly based on agriculture. Even so, more than 70% of the population lived on land “unsuitable for even sustenance agriculture.”

<sup>83</sup> “El Salvador Alert!” U.S. Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, 15 November, 1980. 6.0001 — No.1, Nov. 15, 1980, 8 pp. <http://hrd.idcpublishers.info/hrd/protected/organization.html?id=1228#>



government only provided loans to the rich landowners and neglected the poor peasants, who, without government loans, struggled to make a living.<sup>84</sup> The Salvadoran economy expanded in the 1960's and 70's, but the benefits of this export expansion rarely reached the majority of the Salvadorans, who were rural and landless.<sup>85</sup> In this climate of government neglect, a priest from Coatepeque named Rodolfo Antonio Mujica helped the region's farmers to form cooperatives. In 1972 they founded the "Cooperativa Filial a la Regional Coatepeque." They united to work together in hopes of escaping poverty, marginalization, and the economic crisis. Medina describes that the cooperative became a popular organization in which teachers and students organized in an emerging struggle against the dominant rich class.<sup>86</sup>

Repression was mounting at the national level. By the early 1970's, protests grew against economic inequality.<sup>87</sup> Medina remembers going to San Salvador to protest along with 80,000 to 100,000 people, after which mass-scale attacks began.<sup>88</sup> According to Lorenzo Medina Zamora, the government grew concerned about cooperatives and began to classify those participating in cooperatives, like that in Las Canoas, as communists, subversives, and guerrillas.<sup>89</sup> As he explained, "This is when the massacres started and when the people began to migrate. When they migrated, they concentrated themselves in certain areas, and this is what happened to us here [in Las Canoas]."<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Interviewee Lorenzo M Zamora, Interview by Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, El Salvador.

<sup>85</sup> Lungo, Mario, and Arthur Schmidt. *El Salvador in the Eighties: Counterinsurgency and Revolution*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996: 13.; George Melloan, "Will 'Reform' Save Salvador?," Wall Street Journal (1923 - Current File), October 8, 1980, <http://search.proquest.com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/docview/134494158/abstract/4669B59CF0244EFDPQ/2?accountid=14784>.

<sup>86</sup> Interviewee Lorenzo M Zamora, Interview by Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, El Salvador.

<sup>87</sup> Interviewee Lorenzo M Zamora, Interview by Alex Montalvo, Las Canoas, El Salvador, February 17, 2015.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Interviewee Lorenzo M Zamora, Interview by Alex Montalvo, Las Canoas, El Salvador, February 17, 2015.

Similarly, José Mario Zamora, a member of the cooperative, notes that the cause of the massacre was the creation of cooperatives and the evangelised communities.<sup>91</sup> The ring-wing junta sought to destroy any signs of socialism that demands common ownership, oppressing agrarian cooperatives, women's collectives, Christian communities, and unions. In fact, at the time, Salvadoran law prohibited agricultural workers and public employees from organizing unions, entering collective-bargaining agreements, and holding strikes.<sup>92</sup> Salvadoran authorities had long suspected unionists of guerrilla ties, and as the violence escalated, these people naturally became targets for the military.<sup>93</sup> Leaders, including Medina, were reportedly threatened by the National Guard, and accused of being guerrillas.<sup>94</sup> Pedro Acosta Flores, who was the president of the Cooperativa Filial a la Regional Coatepeque, was taken from his house one night and was threatened with death.<sup>95</sup> Despite this repression, people continued to maintain the cooperative.<sup>96</sup>

According to a survivor, the fear intensified in 1976 and 1977 as soldiers began to visit cooperative members in order to intimidate them to disband their cooperative.<sup>97</sup> The spirit of reform was replaced by fear of the escalating violence.<sup>98</sup> The first captures happened in 1979. Pedro Acosta Flores was captured for seven months and later freed. Additionally, a young girl

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<sup>91</sup> Interviewee José Mario Zamora, Interview by Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, El Salvador.

<sup>92</sup> Americas Watch Committee. *El Salvador's Decade of Terror: Human Rights Since The Assassination of Archbishop Romero* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991): 27.

<sup>93</sup> Laura Briggs, *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012): 162; George Melloan, "Will 'Reform' Save Salvador?," *Wall Street Journal* (1923 - Current File), October 8, 1980, <http://search.proquest.com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/docview/134494158/abstract/4669B59CF0244EFDPO/2?accountid=14784>; Americas Watch Committee. *El Salvador's Decade of Terror: Human Rights Since The Assassination of Archbishop Romero* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991): 27.

<sup>94</sup> Interviewee Lorenzo M Zamora, Interview by Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, El Salvador.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Americas Watch Committee. *El Salvador's Decade of Terror: Human Rights Since The Assassination of Archbishop Romero* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991): 6.

named Elena Gomez from Atahualpa disappeared and was never seen again. By the end of 1979, death squad killings increased to approximately a thousand per month.<sup>99</sup> In January of 1980, the popular organizations of leftist factions combined to form the Coordinadora Revolucionaria de Masas (CRM) of 200,000 people and held a demonstration with about 200,000 people in mid January of 1980.<sup>100</sup> Forces from the National Guard, National Police, and others attacked and killed people involved in the CRM demonstration, “leaving many dead and hundreds injured.”<sup>101</sup> On March 24th, 1980, Archbishop Romero was assassinated.<sup>102</sup>

Incidents of killings and disappearances of labor and peasant activists reached their peak during 1980 and 1981.<sup>103</sup> In 1980, the US State Department conservatively estimated that in that year alone 9,000 people died in political violence.<sup>104</sup> Salvadoran human rights monitor Socorro Jurídico noted that about 8,000 out of their estimated 10,000 deaths were attributed to government forces, 3,700 of whom were peasants.<sup>105</sup> One human rights report by Asociación Internacional Juristas Democráticas notes that often times, the dead were violently mutilated to instill fear in the people.<sup>106</sup> According to Medina, on March 1980, his brother, José Francisco, was killed. Two months later, his cousin Silvia Zamora González was captured and executed; by this time, a general repression had overcome all of the caseríos around Las Canoas as well as

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<sup>99</sup> Lungo, Mario, and Arthur Schmidt. *El Salvador in the Eighties: Counterinsurgency and Revolution*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996.: 17

<sup>100</sup> Lungo, Mario, and Arthur Schmidt. *El Salvador in the Eighties: Counterinsurgency and Revolution*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996.: 17

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Americas Watch Committee. *El Salvador's Decade of Terror: Human Rights Since The Assassination of Archbishop Romero* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991): 28.

<sup>104</sup> Roberto Alvarez et al., “A Report on Human Rights in El Salvador”, 6.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>106</sup> Asociación Internacional Juristas Democráticas, “Misión a El Salvador.” 44. (1980) 10-11.

[http://hrd.idcpublishers.info.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/hrd/protected/results.html?quicksearch=true&f.contents=el+salvador+disappear\\*+1980](http://hrd.idcpublishers.info.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/hrd/protected/results.html?quicksearch=true&f.contents=el+salvador+disappear*+1980)

around the entire country.<sup>107</sup> Through June, July, and August in 1980 the peasants of Las Canoas became victims of direct repression and the government forces began to capture and kill many people, including Ricardo Gomez Martinez, who was captured and killed along with his wife, Margarita Flores, and their disabled seven year old son.<sup>108</sup> But the cooperative in Las Canoas still continued despite the increasing repression.

### **The Tragedy At Las Canoas**

The Asociación Internacional de Juristas Democráticas reported that from the recovery of declarations of repressions from the CDHES (Comisión de Derechos Humanos de El Salvador), and material from the Socorro Jurídico del Arzobispado, it was clear that there existed a program of genocide in the country in September 1980, a month before the massacre at Las Canoas.<sup>109</sup> This correlates with José Mario Zamora's testimony that the soldiers came, not with the intention of capturing or interrogating people but with the sole intention of assassinating.<sup>110</sup>

In September and October, the farmers began to come together at Las Canoas as an act of solidarity and to stand by one another.<sup>111</sup> The location was chosen because it was believed to be safe due to the lack of nearby roads nearby, so that the "enemies could not arrive so easily."<sup>112</sup> Many families from neighboring caseríos left their homes and their land for the central location of Las Canoas to protect themselves from selective captures and killings.<sup>113</sup> There, they stayed in a cement house with some windows and a porch, perched on a steep, grassy hill.

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<sup>107</sup> Interviewee José Mario Zamora, Interview by Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, El Salvador.; Interviewee Lorenzo M Zamora, Interview by Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, El Salvador.

<sup>108</sup> Interviewee Lorenzo M Zamora, Interview by Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, El Salvador.

<sup>109</sup> Asociación Internacional Juristas Democráticas, "Misión a El Salvador." 44. (1980) 10-11.

[http://hrd.idcpublishers.info.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/hrd/protected/results.html?quicksearch=true&f.contents=el+salvador+disappear\\*+1980](http://hrd.idcpublishers.info.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/hrd/protected/results.html?quicksearch=true&f.contents=el+salvador+disappear*+1980)

<sup>110</sup> Interviewee José Mario Zamora, Interview by Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, El Salvador.

<sup>111</sup> Interviewee Lorenzo M Zamora, Interview by Alex Montalvo, Las Canoas, El Salvador, February 17, 2015.

<sup>112</sup> Interviewee Lorenzo M Zamora, Interview by Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, El Salvador.

<sup>113</sup> Interviewee Lorenzo M Zamora, Interview by Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, El Salvador..

On October 8th, 1980, the approximately 70 to 80 people, majority of whom were children, were gathered at the house.<sup>114</sup> They were making lunch around noon,<sup>115</sup> unarmed and unprepared for an armed confrontation.<sup>116</sup> Without warning, a combined force of twenty from the National Guard,<sup>117</sup> government sympathizers, and Salvadoran army encircled and opened fire from two sides of the house. Lunch was interrupted<sup>118</sup> with grenades and bursts of G3 weapons. Without saying why, the troops assassinated people,<sup>119</sup> and while most people were able to run away, others were killed.<sup>120</sup> Las Canoas massacre survivor Reina Hernández recalls her experience trying to run away from the soldiers:

“It was at 12 noon. At that moment we were going to give food to the kids, when the [military] showed up. I was sick. I was really sick. And my son who was 5 years old was with me in bed. When we heard the gunfire, I tried to flee but I couldn't. The women who were running away were getting killed. I was behind a girl and when I saw that she got shot and fell in front of me, I said, my God, what do I do? With my son? The house had a window. I don't know how I did it, but I threw myself through the window. I pulled myself up on the window ledge and through myself through to the other side. My husband was there with my other two girls, and a bunch of little kids. She had one leg already broken, and another here, on her hand. I grabbed my three kids, I was going to run out of the house, but I couldn't. The National Guard was there, surrounding us, and they aimed at me, and I said, may God's will be done. I went back, returned with my three kids, and I went like this up against the wall, hugging them. That's where I got shot. At the same time as [the bullet] hit me, it also hit my three year old daughter. Well, when I felt the impact, I got up with my three children and I went running outside.”<sup>121</sup>

When the attack ended, the soldiers told the people still hiding inside the house to come out, saying that they would take the injured to the hospital. Those who complied were forced to

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<sup>114</sup> Interviewee Lorenzo M Zamora, Interview by Alex Montalvo, Las Canoas, El Salvador, February 17, 2015.

<sup>115</sup> Interviewee Lorenzo M Zamora, Interview by Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, El Salvador.

<sup>116</sup> Interviewee Lorenzo M Zamora, Interview by Alex Montalvo, Las Canoas, El Salvador, February 17, 2015.

<sup>117</sup> Interviewee José Mario Zamora, Interview by Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, El Salvador.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Interviewee Lorenzo M Zamora, Interview by Alex Montalvo, Las Canoas, El Salvador, February 17, 2015.

<sup>120</sup> Interviewee José Mario Zamora, Interview by Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, El Salvador.

<sup>121</sup> Interviewee Reina D Hernandez, Interview by Angelina Godoy, Santa Ana, El Salvador, February 17, 2015.

lay face down on the ground from noon to six in the evening, during which time many were tortured and raped, and some killed.<sup>122</sup> As Reina Hernández reported,

“My husband said to me, ‘Go out,’ he said, ‘Go out with the children, maybe they won't do anything to you.’ ‘No,’ I said to him, ‘They're going to kill me. I want to die here with you.’ But then they threw a grenade into the kitchen. A bunch of bowls and stuff came crashing down on top of us. And the crying/screaming of the children. ‘OK,’ I said, ‘I'm going to go out.’ I decided to go out, I stood up, I grabbed my three children, and all the women and children went out into the patio with our hands up. We went out like that to the patio, and they told us, get down on the ground, there, face down, everyone. They kept us there like that from noon until 6 in the afternoon. It was getting dark. My children, when they saw that [soldiers] were approaching me with a big knife to chop off my head, they screamed. They said, ‘Don't kill my mommy! Don't do anything to my mommy!’ And they screamed...”<sup>123</sup>

Twenty-three people were reportedly killed in Caserío Las Canoas, including ten females, one of whom was a girl, nine males, and four unidentified people.<sup>124</sup> According to Lorenzo Medina Zamora, seven children and four women who were wounded were captured and taken to the hospital; other survivors reported similar, though slightly varying, numbers. The soldiers who had attacked the house led the injured to the house of an unaffiliated local man who owned a pickup truck, and then forced him to take them to the public hospital in Santa Ana.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Interviewee Reina D Hernandez, Interview by Angelina Godoy, Santa Ana, El Salvador, February 17, 2015..

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Juan Carlos Barahona, “Familiares de Víctimas de Conflicto Armado Denuncian a FGR En Santa Ana, *La Prensa Gráfica*, October 8, 2010, <http://www.laprensagrafica.com/el-salvador/lodeldia/145655-familiares-de-victimas-de-conflicto-armado-denuncian-a-fgr-en-santa-ana>; Gloria Morán, “Masacre de Las Canoas, Doble Dolor,” *Diario Digital ContraPunto, El Salvador, Central American*, November 24, 2012, <http://www.contrapunto.com.sv/ddhh/masacre-de-las-canoas-doble-dolor>; Beatriz Castillo, “El Salvador: Familiares de La Masacre de Santa Ana Piden La Entrega de Los Restos Óseos,” *El Ututo*, December 6, 2012. <http://elututopolitico.blogspot.com/2012/12/el-salvador-familiares-de-la-masacre-de.html>; Centro Para La Promoción De Los Derechos Humanos "Madeleine Lagadec", "Restos óseos de los víctimas de la masacre de Canoas" (lecture, Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, San Salvador, El Salvador,, February 16, 2015).

<sup>125</sup> Interviewee Margarita Zamora, Interview by Alex Montalvo, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 21, 2015.

## Media Coverage At the Time

The media had extensive coverage at the time, even in the United States, of violence occurring in the Santa Ana region.<sup>126</sup> However, these reports focused on violence by guerrillas, rather than on government attacks. According to the Salvadoran newspaper, *Prensa Latina*, guerrilla attacks on the National Guard, police, and army had intensified in Santa Ana by the beginning of October 1980.<sup>127</sup> On October 1st, guerrillas used hand grenades and rifles attacked the National Police barracks in Santa Ana.<sup>128</sup> On October 14th, an article stated that 30 people were shot dead in Sonsonate and Santa Ana.<sup>129</sup>

US government documents also reveal clear awareness of the violence in Santa Ana during the week of October 4th to October 10th, 1980. For example, a cable sent from the US Embassy in San Salvador to the Secretary of State in Washington states, “10/6 A group of alleged to be leftists attacked and robbed an agricultural cooperative near Candelaria de la Frontera (Santa Ana)...10/6 In the city of Santa Ana, security forces killed five of a group of a reported forty member gang of bandits described as ‘masquerading’ as leftist guerrillas...10/6 In the city of Santa Ana, a soft drink distributorship was robbed of weapons and a large amount of money by a group of masked men.”<sup>130</sup> There is clear evidence of violence in the area during this time, but government attacks in remote locations such as Las Canoas was not covered by the media.

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<sup>126</sup> “Salvadoran Army Reports Killing 17 Left-Wing Guerrillas in Clash,” *The New York Times*, October 1, 1980, [http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9B05E4D91138E732A25752C0A9669D94619FD6CF](http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9B05E4D91138E732A25752C0A9669D94619FD6CF;); “Guerrillas Attack Regular Forces in Various Areas,” *Prensa Latina*, October 1, 1980.; “50 Killed in El Salvador,” *The Seattle Times*, October 14, 1980.

<sup>127</sup> “Guerrillas Attack Regular Forces in Various Areas,” *Prensa Latina*, October 1, 1980.

<sup>128</sup> “Salvadoran Army Reports Killing 17 Left-Wing Guerrillas in Clash,” *The New York Times*, October 1, 1980, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9B05E4D91138E732A25752C0A9669D94619FD6CF>; “Guerrillas Attack Regular Forces in Various Areas,” *Prensa Latina*, October 1, 1980.

<sup>129</sup> “50 Killed in El Salvador,” *The Seattle Times*, October 14, 1980.

<sup>130</sup> Robert E. White, “Violence Week in Review,” October 14, 1980, Digital National Archive.

## Aftermath

Right after the massacre, children were taken away and placed in orphanages without the consent of their parents, including Ana and Isabel Williams, the two disappeared sisters whom Pro-Búsqueda has been able to locate.<sup>131</sup> The orphanage told their mother, Ester Monterola López, “They’re here, but you have to go get their birth certificates and pay 20 colones for each of them.”<sup>132</sup>

“I got the money, even though I had to borrow it. But when I came back with it they told me that they had given them away in adoption to another country, and I didn’t even know which country. So I came back crying, very sad. I didn’t know what to do. I just asked God to keep them alive and keep them well, and that one day I might be able to see them again.”<sup>133</sup>

By the time Ester Monterola López was able to collect the children’s birth certificates, Ana and Isabel had been sent to the United States for adoption.<sup>134</sup> Asociación Pro-Búsqueda’s researcher Margarita Zamora claimed that the intent of the orphanage “[w]as that the girls would go [abroad] and it would be hard for [Ester] to get the money... This was the situation of poverty which Ester lived along with many other Salvadorans.”<sup>135</sup>

Despite the apparent evidence of on violence in the area at the time, there has not yet been a thorough investigation into the massacre at Las Canoas. In 2007, 27 years after the massacre, the Fiscalía (or District Attorney’s Office) in Santa Ana approved the exhumation of the remains in Las Canoas and analysis of DNA<sup>136</sup> for three reasons: to allow a proper Christian

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<sup>131</sup> Interviewee Margarita Zamora, Interview by Alex Montalvo, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 21, 2015.

<sup>132</sup> Interviewee Ester M López, Interview by Angelina Godoy, Santa Ana, El Salvador, February 17, 2015.

<sup>133</sup> Interviewee Ester M López, Interview by Angelina Godoy, Santa Ana, El Salvador, February 17, 2015.

<sup>134</sup> Interviewee Margarita Zamora, Interview by Alex Montalvo, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 21, 2015.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Gloria Morán, “Masacre de Las Canoas, Doble Dolor,” *Diario Digital ContraPunto, El Salvador, Central American*, November 24, 2012, <http://www.contrapunto.com.sv/ddhh/masacre-de-las-canoas-doble-dolor>



burial, discover the truth of what happened in Las Canoas, and for humanitarian purposes.<sup>137</sup> The District Attorney purposefully included “humanitarian purposes” as a reason to avoid the politicization of these proceedings, focusing on allowing survivors and loved ones to heal.<sup>138</sup>

The exhumation was authorized to be performed about 30 feet away from the house where some who survived the massacre had returned to bury the dead with their personal effects days after the incident.<sup>139</sup> It was to be done during the rainy season and on a downhill slope, making conditions difficult for investigators.<sup>140</sup> The exhumation not only uncovered remains, but also pieces of metal shrapnel, and clothes typical of the 1980’s, but with holes created by firearms.<sup>141</sup> Various coins were also found near the remains and inside the pockets of the clothes, all dated pre-1980, helping to corroborate the date of the massacre.<sup>142</sup> The remains found in the exhumation were to undergo DNA analysis to identify the victims of the massacre, and so were taken to the Instituto de Medicina Legal. The remains were to be returned to their loved ones in February 2009.<sup>143</sup>

However, as of 2015, the remains have yet to be returned to the families of the victims.<sup>144</sup> The Fiscalía General de la República (FGR) reports being unable to return the remains because it would “disturb the investigation protocol.”<sup>145</sup> According to the FGR, the Instituto de Medicina Legal in Santa Ana says that it cannot test this DNA since it is more than 32 years old and the

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<sup>137</sup> Centro Para La Promoción De Los Derechos Humanos "Madeleine Lagadec", "Restos óseos de los víctimas de la masacre de Canoas" (lecture, Pro-Búsqueda, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 16, 2015).

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Gloria Morán, “Masacre de Las Canoas, Doble Dolor,” *Diario Digital ContraPunto, El Salvador, Central American*, November 24, 2012, <http://www.contrapunto.com.sv/ddhh/masacre-de-las-canoas-doble-dolor>

<sup>145</sup> Beatriz Castillo, “El Salvador: Familiares de La Masacre de Santa Ana Piden La Entrega de Los Restos Óseos,” *El Ututo*, December 6, 2012. <http://elututopolitico.blogspot.com/2012/12/el-salvador-familiares-de-la-masacre-de.html>.

Institution does not own sensitive enough equipment to test the small DNA sample.<sup>146</sup> Hence, they claim that there is not enough evidence yet to complete a full investigation, and therefore cannot return the remains.<sup>147</sup> Many of the family members of those who were found in the exhumation have already been able to identify their loved ones due to the clothes they were wearing, and yet they are not allowed to give them a burial in accordance with their religious traditions.<sup>148</sup>

Lawyers at the Center for the Promotion of Human Rights “Madeleine Lagadec,” have spent years attempting to convince the FGR to order the return the remains to the families.<sup>149</sup> There still has been no announcement of a clear plan by the FGR, but in February 2015 the case was moved to the Fiscalía de Derechos Humanos, a department within the FGR that concentrates on human rights investigations.<sup>150</sup> The Center demands that the FGR protect the families’ right to bury their loved ones and that FGR should simply extract the necessary DNA and give the remains back to the families so that they may begin to heal.<sup>151</sup> The Center hopes that the case will be resolved by the end of this year, but if not, intends to take it to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Beatriz Castillo, “El Salvador: Familiares de La Masacre de Santa Ana Piden La Entrega de Los Restos Óseos,” *El Ututo*, December 6, 2012. <http://elututopolitico.blogspot.com/2012/12/el-salvador-familiares-de-la-masacre-de.html>.; Centro Para La Promoción De Los Derechos Humanos “Madeleine Lagadec”

<sup>147</sup> Centro Para La Promoción De Los Derechos Humanos “Madeleine Lagadec”, “Restos óseos de los víctimas de la masacre de Canoas” (lecture, Pro-Búsqueda, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 16, 2015).

<sup>148</sup> Juan Carlos Barahona, “Familiares de Víctimas de Conflicto Armado Denuncian a FGR En Santa Ana, *La Prensa Gráfica*, October 8, 2010, <http://www.laprensagrafica.com/el-salvador/lodeldia/145655-familiares-de-victimas-de-conflicto-armado-denuncian-a-fgr-en-santa-ana>

<sup>149</sup> Israel Gonzales, “Sobrevivientes de La Masacre de Las Canoas Piden justicia,” *DiarioCoLatino*, October 13, 2010.

<sup>150</sup> Centro Para La Promoción De Los Derechos Humanos “Madeleine Lagadec”, “Restos óseos de los víctimas de la masacre de Canoas” (lecture, Pro-Búsqueda, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 16, 2015).

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> Centro Para La Promoción De Los Derechos Humanos “Madeleine Lagadec”, “Restos óseos de los víctimas de la masacre de Canoas” (lecture, Pro-Búsqueda, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 16, 2015).

## Conclusion

Massacres of civilian populations in rural areas occurred systematically and strategically under the government's assumption that that civilians who did not want to cooperate with the insurgents would leave areas with high insurgency presence, which concluded that all who remained in areas with high guerrilla were allegedly collaborators.<sup>153</sup>

“the phenomenon of the massacres occurred deliberately as part of a strategy systematically planned by the Armed Forces of El Salvador; [thus] it cannot be argued that the innumerable mass executions of the civilian population were isolated acts of violence of which the senior authorities of the Armed Forces and the Government in power were unaware; to the contrary, they were inserted in and were a central part of a specific counterinsurgency policy of the State.”<sup>154</sup>

While this report provides preliminary information about the massacre, it is only one step in documenting what really transpired in order to recognize El Salvador's past atrocities and present struggle for restoration and reconciliation after decades of violence. Land reforms and poor economic conditions drove the farmers in the Las Canoas region to organize cooperatives in order to share their resources and make a living. The Salvadoran government saw this as a communist act and responded by massacring, torturing, injuring civilians, destroying farms and houses, and abducting children. Though the massacre at Las Canoas occurred 35 years ago, there has never been a full investigation of what occurred. The denial of justice to survivors is exacerbated by the FGR's failure to return the community's loved ones' remains to them for reburial; this procedural irregularity constitutes a further violation of their rights. As the founder of Asociación Pro-Búsqueda Jon Cortina has always insisted, there is a wound among

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<sup>153</sup> Tommie Sue Montgomery. *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace*, Second Edition (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995; 1981 El Salvador Annual Report, Amnesty International

<sup>154</sup> Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Case of the Massacres of El Mozote and neighboring locations v. El Salvador, Merits, Reparations and Costs, Judgment of October 25, 2012, I/A Court H.R., Series C No. 252 (2012).

Salvadoran parents, children, and society that cannot heal until people know the truth and justice is done.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Laura Briggs, *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012): 177

## **The Massacre at La Quesera: Timeline from September 14 to October 30, 1981**

The Bajo Lempa river region is in the department of Usulután<sup>156</sup> in the southeast region of El Salvador. At this agricultural area to the east of the Lempa River, about 2,800 soldiers<sup>157</sup> of the Atlacatl<sup>158</sup> and Atonal Battalions, the 5th Brigade Infantry Unit based in San Vicente, the 6th Brigade Infantry Unit based in Usulután, the National Guards, and Salvadoran Air Forces<sup>159</sup> captured, tortured, assassinated civilians, burned houses and farms, and abducted children<sup>160</sup> between October 20th and 30th, 1981.<sup>161</sup> The La Quesera massacre reportedly resulted in 350 to 500 deaths<sup>162</sup>, most of whom were children and women.<sup>163</sup> In addition, 24 children and 36 women disappeared and approximately 1,000 people were displaced.<sup>164</sup> While the violence affected many villages and hamlets in the districts of Berlín, San Agustín and Jiquilisco, all within the department of Usulután, the massacre took on the name of the village of La Quesera, where most peasants fled to hide from the soldiers.<sup>165</sup>

In 2004, the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, EAAF) conducted exhumations and analysis of the remains of the victims of the La Quesera massacre. They worked with forensic doctors and odontologists from the Institute of

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<sup>156</sup> “El Salvador,” in *Annual Report 2005*, (Buenos Aires: Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, 2005), 103.

<sup>157</sup> “AROUND THE WORLD; Salvadoran Commandos Raid Rebel Region,” *The New York Times*, October 29, 1981.

<sup>158</sup> “Lempa Bridges Area Fortified,” *El Diario de Hoy*, October 28 1981; “Major Operation Launched,” *El Mundo*, October 27 1981, UPI, “AROUND THE WORLD; Salvadoran Commandos Raid Rebel Region,” *The New York Times*, October 28, 1981; Cynthia G. Brown, *July 20, 1982 supplement to the Report on human rights in El Salvador* (New York, NY: Americas Watch Committee, 1982).

<sup>159</sup> Tutela Legal del Arzobispado. *Comision Arquidiocesana de Justicia y Paz*. (San Salvador: 2006), 4.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>161</sup> “El Salvador,” in *Annual Report 2005*, (Buenos Aires: Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, 2005), 103. ; Tutela Legal: Oct. 20-30, Americas Watch on Report of Human Rights in El Salvador: Oct. 20-29; Tutela Legal del Arzobispado. *Comision Arquidiocesana de Justicia y Paz*. (San Salvador: 2006), 2.

<sup>162</sup> United States Department of Justice Executive Office for Immigration Review; Immigration Court Miami, Florida. In the matter of: Jose Guillermo García-Merino, Removal proceedings. Expert Report of Professor Terry L. Karl.; Tutela Legal del Arzobispado. *Comision Arquidiocesana de Justicia y Paz*. (San Salvador: 2006), 4.

<sup>163</sup> “El Salvador,” in *Annual Report 2005*, (Buenos Aires: Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, 2005), 103.

<sup>164</sup> “Solidaridad Boletín Internacional,” Socorro Jurídico Del Arzobispado, November 30, 1981.

<sup>165</sup> Tutela Legal del Arzobispado. *Comision Arquidiocesana de Justicia y Paz*. (San Salvador: 2006), 5.

Legal Medicine at Santa Tecla and San Miguel.<sup>166</sup> The forensic analysis confirmed remains of approximately 376 victims at the massacre sites.<sup>167</sup>

This report is an attempt to document the tragedy that occurred in the Bajo Lempa region of El Salvador in 1981. Information is drawn from testimonies of survivors, newspaper articles, declassified United States documents, other government documents, and reports from human rights organizations.

### **Context**

The massacre occurred at the peak of institutionalized violence by the US-sponsored Salvadoran junta that attempted to repress all expressions of dissent.<sup>168</sup> The government sought to disarticulate any opposition movements through the use of arbitrary arrests, beatings, killings, disappearances and selective assassinations. Salvadoran human rights monitor Socorro Jurídico reported a total of 34,131 total victims of assassinations, disappearances, and killings of civilians throughout El Salvador,<sup>169</sup> around 800 political killings per month by the military and military-linked death squads between 1980-1982.<sup>170</sup>

At the time of the massacre, the Bajo Lempa River region had approximately 3,000 adobe houses and ranches and 20,000 inhabitants,<sup>171</sup> most of whom were peasants dedicated to agriculture and fishing as a means of survival. However, due to suspected high guerrilla presence and activity, the Bajo Lempa area was subjected to continuous military violence since the end of

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<sup>166</sup> “El Salvador,” in *Annual Report 2005*, (Buenos Aires: Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, 2005), 104.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> Americas Watch Committee. *El Salvador’s Decade of Terror: Human Rights Since The Assassination of Archbishop Romero* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991):10.

<sup>169</sup> Instituto de Derechos Humanos (IDHUCA), *Los Derechos Humanos en El Salvador durante 1985, Fascículo II*, Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas, San Salvador, April 12, 1986, 39.

<sup>170</sup> “Special Freedom House Report: Mission to El Salvador” *Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data* (1989): 22.

<sup>171</sup> Tutela Legal del Arzobispado. *Comision Arquidiocesana de Justicia y Paz*. (San Salvador: 2006), 3.

the 1970s.<sup>172</sup> The attacks occurred as regularly as every 15 to 30 days.<sup>173</sup> As one survivor reported,

“[Our] sufferings began in 1977. There was a young man who, like any other young person, wanted to be a candidate, [called] "Felipe Patatiesa" [who] went to declare himself a candidate for the opposition party in those days. All of those who saw that we were living badly in those days decided to support him. But immediately after the elections for mayor, [everyone who supported him] started to suffer, suffer, suffer. The National Guard beat us up all the time. They took away my pistol I used to have that I used for my work [...] we suffered, those of us who supported him...When it got to 1980 things were even more serious, more still when they killed Msgr Oscar Arnulfo Romero, which we thought was even more cruel. They started to arrive where we lived, and there civilians died, humble people, honorable people, without knowing why they were killed. The authorities would arrive and burn the houses, they killed children, killed elderly people, women, not to mention any man that they found on the street, and that was from 1980 onward, because it was in March that Monseñor was killed and by April, May, they were persecuting me. People always struggled to work, but they destroyed their crops, they destroyed everything, and you had to always be fleeing and trying to work to survive, but it kept getting worse, until the moment that we couldn't anymore, which was October 24, 1981, when everyone was massacred.”<sup>174</sup>

In response, many civilians organized themselves, fled their homes, and crossed from one side of the Lempa River to the other whenever they saw the army approaching.<sup>175</sup>

The month before the massacre in 1981, the army began “search and destroy missions,”<sup>176</sup> resulting in 16,266 death in which 7,916 were civilian peasants between January and December of 1981.<sup>177</sup> The military missions were most intensive in San Vicente and Usulután.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> “El Salvador,” in *Annual Report 2005*, (Buenos Aires: Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, 2005), 103.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> Interviewee Don Salvador Garcia, Interview by Angelina Godoy, La Quesera, Usulután, El Salvador, February 20, 2015.

<sup>175</sup> “El Salvador,” in *Annual Report 2005*, (Buenos Aires: Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, 2005), 103.

<sup>176</sup> Raymond Bonner, “For Salvador Victims, Macabre Fate,” *The New York Times*, November 17, 1981, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/11/17/world/for-salvador-victims-macabre-fate.html>.

<sup>177</sup> Socorro Jurídico Cristiano “Arzobispo Oscar Romero”, in *Instituto de Derechos Humanos (IDHUCA), Los Derechos Humanos en El Salvador durante el año 1985*, San Salvador, April 1986: 41.

<sup>178</sup> Raymond Bonner, “For Salvador Victims, Macabre Fate,” *The New York Times*, November 17, 1981, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/11/17/world/for-salvador-victims-macabre-fate.html>.

In response, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, FMLN), the coalition of guerrilla forces, conducted its biggest attack on October 15th, 1981, five days prior to the massacre. Under “Operation Chalatenango,” FMLN bombed the “Puente de Oro,”<sup>179</sup> a bridge over the Lempa River that connected the eastern provinces to the rest of the country, which carried more than 68 percent of the nation’s trade, and was used to transport army troops.<sup>180</sup> Instead of retaliating against the guerrilla forces, the government attacked the local civilians, assuming collaboration between inhabitants and guerrillas.<sup>181</sup>

During the army attacks on area civilians, the troops reportedly shouted slogans such as “Here comes the birds to devour the bread [referring to the civilian population]. You are who give food to the guerrillas. Now, the guerrillas are going to die of hunger because they are not going to have someone to feed them.”<sup>182</sup>

Many civilians were massacred systematically and strategically throughout El Salvador “simply because they inhabited certain strategically important areas where guerrillas were believed to have been active.”<sup>183</sup> In actuality, many civilians in the region had no affiliation, and were too poor to leave their homes where their families had been residing for generations. This was the case in the Bajo Lempa region as well.

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<sup>179</sup> Cynthia, Brown. “Supplement to the Report on Human Rights in El Salvador”. Americas Watch Community. July 10, 1982, 25.

<sup>180</sup> “Oro Bridge Destruction Operation Described,” Managua Barricada, November 23 1981

<sup>181</sup> “Boletín Urgente,” *Socorro Jurídico del Arzobispado*, November 1981, 4.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> Amnesty International, “Letter to US Secretary of State Alexander Haig on Possible Impact of United States Military Assistance to El Salvador on AI Concerns in that Country,” *El Salvador Packet*, May 11, 1981.



## The Tragedy At the Bajo Lempa Region

The Bajo Lempa region affected by the massacre extends from San Marcos Lempa to San Agustín and includes villages of La Quesera, San Pedro, Las Delicias, Valle el Salitre, Las Crucitas, Hoja de Sal, Linares Caulotal, Nombre de Dios, Filón, Linares Montañitas, San Juan Letrán, Las Piletas, Berlín, Puente Cuscatlán, Tres Calles, El Jícaro, La Loma, Valle Nuevo, Corosal, Las Hojas, Las Hornillas, La Unión, Bolívar, El Cedro, La Ceibita, El Sitio, and Valle los Ayala.

The massacre took place in the context of a military operation officially named “Operation Encirclement” in reference to the army’s practice of surrounding entire regions and systematically eliminating anybody within those borders.<sup>184</sup> The operation was reportedly characterized by almost 24-hour shelling of the area by 205-mm guns, helicopters, and military planes.<sup>185</sup>

On October 20th, the military and the paramilitary troops began to seize the aforementioned regions, terrorizing, torturing, and assassinating people with firearms and knives.<sup>186</sup> Although the army had already been habitually attacking the villages prior to the massacre, the violence that began on the 20th was more systematic and of a larger scale; the massacre was one of the first strategic and the largest military “scorched earth” operations by the Salvadoran military.<sup>187</sup> As a survivor of the massacre reported,

“Specifically on the 20th day of October, military personnel of the armed forces invaded El Cantón in a different way to what they commonly did. [Usually,] when they passed

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<sup>184</sup> “Boletín Urgente,” Socorro Jurídico del Arzobispado, November 1981, 2.

<sup>185</sup> “Duarte reports alliance with Guatemala, Honduras,” *Havana International Service*, October 30 1981

<sup>186</sup> Tutela Legal del Arzobispado. *Comisión Arquidiocesana de Justicia y Paz*. (San Salvador: 2006), 4.

<sup>187</sup> Asociación Pro- Búsqueda, “Víctimas demandan investigar desapariciones durante la Masacre de La Quesera,” accessed January 8, 2015.

<http://www.probusqueda.org.sv/victimas-demandan-investigar-a-la-fiscalia-general-de-la-republica-el-paradero-de-los-ninos-y-ninas-desaparecidos-durante-la-masacre-de-la-quesera/>.

through the area, they would kill them if they found someone on the street without hesitation, but they respected those who were inside their homes. But this time was different. They entered his home and killed the inhabitants or took them outside to execute them in another place. He could see that the surrounding villages were in flames and could hear shots from afar.”<sup>188</sup>

On October 21st, the soldiers continued to carry out their “scorched earth” operation; they burned crops, stole and killed animals, captured, interrogated, and tortured men, raped women, and executed civilians at their homes or on the farmlands, to achieve the total extermination of the population, whom the government believed to be supporters of the insurgents or potential insurgents, and their resources.<sup>189</sup> Marta Arias, a survivor, explains,

“They threw a liquid into the water [and] into the rivers. They threw bombs [that] fell in the water. then anyone who fell in the water became sick. I [once] fell and got one foot in the river, which left me with a large wound on the sole of my foot that swelled up a lot. It was acid that they threw in the water, so anyone who fell in the river became sick, and anyone who drank the water died.”<sup>190</sup>

Milagro Martínez, a survivor and mother of two disappeared children, recalls what the scorched earth campaign did to her. “They burned all the houses, all the land here in Las Piletas, everything was burned, we came back with our arms crossed, without our children and without our house, without clothing, without anything. Even the livestock had been killed.”<sup>191</sup>

On October 22nd and 23rd, the troops began the encircling strategy, in which they closed in and trapped civilians within the mentioned villages and destroyed houses in the regions of San Vicente and Usulután. Realizing that hiding inside their homes was not safe, people began to abandon their houses and flee to nearby mountains, ravines, and gorges.<sup>192</sup> Many sought refuge

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<sup>188</sup> “Informe especial sobre masacres durante el conflicto: Comisión de la Verdad”. March 07, 2005: 28-30.

<sup>189</sup> Tutela Legal del Arzobispado. *Comision Arquidiocesana de Justicia y Paz*. (San Salvador: 2006), 5.; “Salvadoreño desaparecido en guerra hace 33 años se reencuentra con su familia,” *La Prensa Grafica*, May 24, 2014.

<sup>190</sup> Interviewee Marta Arias, Interview by Angelina Godoy, La Quesera, Usulután, El Salvador, February 18, 2015.

<sup>191</sup> Interviewee Milagro Martínez, Interview by Angelina Godoy, La Quesera, Usulután, El Salvador, February 18, 2015.

<sup>192</sup> Tutela Legal del Arzobispado. *Comision Arquidiocesana de Justicia y Paz*. (San Salvador: 2006), 5.

in the cantón of La Quesera, while others fled to Linares Caulotal and other places.<sup>193</sup> Other civilians formed groups and ran in various directions to escape.<sup>194</sup>

During these escapes, many people, especially young children, drowned while attempting to swim across the Lempa River.<sup>195</sup> Survivors claim that the Air Force bombed the rafts that fleeing villagers used to cross the Lempa River,<sup>196</sup> which resulted in drowning and sweeping of the bodies down the Lempa river current.<sup>197</sup> Many people in the areas recalled seeing corpses floating down the river after the operation, which the military officials reported as “a number of terrorists”<sup>198</sup> who had crossed the river.<sup>199</sup>

Children and women suffered the most from the violence.<sup>200</sup> When caught by the soldiers, children were reportedly forced onto their knees and women on their backs then executed with machine-guns.<sup>201</sup> Many children were taken away by helicopters and thrown out towards the Lempa River; those who didn’t fall into the river were found on land or trees by the river.<sup>202</sup> As a survivor described,

“But we saw [...] the planes and helicopters throw [children] out. They went up in the plane and threw them into the Lempa river, tied up with reeds. [When] we went to look for them, we saw the large number of young children that they killed and put in the trenches. Some had head hanging by reeds in the sticks. Other girls were found, dead, sitting on stakes.”<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Tutela Legal del Arzobispado. *Comision Arquidiocesana de Justicia y Paz*. (San Salvador: 2006), 5.

<sup>194</sup> La Lempa, El Ri6n and El Casta6o river, El Fil6n and La Carbonera mountains, banks of Loma del P6jaro, San Juan de Letr6n, and Santa Clara.

<sup>195</sup> Tutela Legal del Arzobispado. *Comision Arquidiocesana de Justicia y Paz*. (San Salvador: 2006), 7.

<sup>196</sup> Cynthia G. Brown, *July 20, 1982 supplement to the Report on human rights in El Salvador* (New York, NY: Americas Watch Committee, 1982).

<sup>197</sup> “El Salvador,” in *Annual Report 2005*, (Buenos Aires: Equipo Argentino de Antropologia Forense, 2005), 103.

<sup>198</sup> Cynthia G. Brown, *July 20, 1982 supplement to the Report on human rights in El Salvador* (New York, NY: Americas Watch Committee, 1982): 25.

<sup>199</sup> “Informe especial sobre masacres durante el conflicto; Comisi6n de la Verdad”. March 07, 2005, 25.

<sup>200</sup> “El Salvador,” in *Annual Report 2005*, (Buenos Aires: Equipo Argentino de Antropologia Forense, 2005), 103.

<sup>201</sup> Tactic also used in the El Mozote Massacre

<sup>202</sup> Interviewee Salvador Garcia, Interview by Angelina Godoy, La Quesera, Usulut6n, El Salvador, February 20, 2015.

<sup>203</sup> Interviewee Marta Arias, Interview by Angelina Godoy, La Quesera, Usulut6n, El Salvador, February 20, 2015.

A number of children were forcibly taken away from their families by soldiers; many of these children's whereabouts remain unknown even today.<sup>204</sup>

On October 24th, the military operation intensified. Pregnant women, women with small children, along with the sick, elderly, and others who were unable to escape were murdered in their homes.<sup>205</sup> Many women, regardless of age, were raped and sexually abused in front of their families before they were executed. Marta Arias, a survivor of the massacre, watched her daughter die in front of her eyes, as “they took away my ten year old daughter [...] they raped my girl, tortured her, killed her, and chopped her into pieces.”<sup>206</sup>

Some women were hung by their handkerchiefs or apron cords, thrown from helicopters into the Lempa River,<sup>207</sup> beheaded, or killed with gunfire, while others were pierced through their genitals.<sup>208</sup> Some women were put aside to cook for the armed forces, then systematically raped and murdered.<sup>209</sup> Remains were dispersed on paths, ravines, and banks along the cantóns and many of them were eaten by birds and other animals.<sup>210</sup>

On October 25th, guerrilla forces attempted to dynamite a railroad bridge 500 meters from the Oro Bridge that they had destroyed, as it was the only remaining link between San Marcos and San Nicolas Lempa.<sup>211</sup> More than one hundred guerrillas arrived in small boats on

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<sup>204</sup> United States Department of Justice Executive Office for Immigration Review; Immigration Court Miami, Florida. In the matter of: Jose Guillermo García-Merino, Removal proceedings. Expert Report of Professor Terry L. Karl.

<sup>205</sup> Tutela Legal del Arzobispado. *Comision Arquidiocesana de Justicia y Paz*. (San Salvador: 2006), 6.

<sup>206</sup> Interviewee Marta Arias, Interview by Angelina Godoy, La Quesera, Usulután, El Salvador, February 18, 2015.

<sup>207</sup> *28 Años de la Masacre en La Quesera*. Noticias de la Universidad de Centroamericana. October 29, 2009.

<sup>208</sup> Tutela Legal del Arzobispado. *Comision Arquidiocesana de Justicia y Paz*. (San Salvador: 2006), 7.

<sup>209</sup> “El Salvador,” in *Annual Report 2005*, (Buenos Aires: Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, 2005), 103.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Attacked occurred on October 23 according to El Diario De Hoy

the Lempa River, but were detected by the military.<sup>212</sup> In response, on October 28th the army declared the area between the Oro Bridge and railroad bridge a military zone.<sup>213</sup>

According to the Salvadoran government, October 27th was the year's largest army drive against guerrillas.<sup>214</sup> 1,200 troops from the Atlacatl Brigade joined the 1,600 troops along the Lempa River. While previous offensives of that year involved no more than 2,000 soldiers, 2,800 soldiers were brought to the Bajo Lempa region because it was declared as a military zone.<sup>215</sup>

On October 30th, the troops began to retire, but not without the Salvadoran Air Force helicopters launching bombs and devices, killing and wounding those who remained in the region.<sup>216</sup>

### **Media Coverage**

The Salvadoran media focused extensively on the FMLN's destruction of the bridge and its threats against the government. According to the Salvadoran newspaper, *El Diario de Hoy*, the Committee of the Press of the Armed Forces (COPREFA) reported that the military operation in the Bajo Lempa region in October 1981 was carried out against the guerrilla insurgents who bombed the Oro Bridge.<sup>217</sup> The military justified the violence as eradication of "terrorist" activities in the region, "The COPREFA assured that [...] the military has undertaken to eradicate terrorist actions from the area that have been harming the Salvadoran people. They are finished."

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<sup>212</sup> "AROUND THE WORLD Rebel Plan Fails at Salvador Bridge," *The Globe and Mail*, October 26 1981.

<sup>213</sup> "Around the World; Salvadoran Commandos Raid Rebel Region," *New York Times*, October 29, 1981; "Lempa Bridges Area Fortified," *El Diario de Hoy*, October 28 1981

<sup>214</sup> "Major Operation Launched," *El Mundo*, October 27, 1981

<sup>215</sup> "Around the World; Salvadoran Commandos Raid Rebel Region," *New York Times*, October 29, 1981

<sup>216</sup> Tutela Legal del Arzobispado. *Comision Arquidiocesana de Justicia y Paz*.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

COPREFA also informed the media that 132 terrorists died in the military operation and that the bodies were buried to avoid a possible epidemic,<sup>219</sup> contradicting the various testimonies and forensic investigation that report deaths of approximately 350 to 500.<sup>220</sup> Furthermore, the army's alleged burial of the bodies contradicted the forensic report that indicated that bodies were exposed to open air and animals for up to two to three weeks.<sup>221</sup>

US government documents also reveal clear awareness of the violence in the Bajo Lempa region during the 10 days of October 20th to October 30th, 1981, and subsequently declassified documents reveal a behind-the-scenes awareness that atrocities were being committed, though this was never made public at the time. According to a November 7th cable sent by U.S. Ambassador Deane Hinton, "It is particularly disturbing to have detailed reports of Salvadoran massacres of women and children along the Rio Lempa and Chalatenango. Indeed, our own officials were witnesses to a machine gun attack on apparently unarmed civilians by helicopter."

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## **Aftermath**

Several of the exhumation sites only contained incomplete or fragmented human bones collected by people and buried weeks after the massacre. Many of these bones were fragmented due to peri-mortem trauma, like gunshot wounds and high velocity explosions, and post-mortem trauma caused by erosion and environmental degradation. As a result, these fragments are particularly difficult to identify by scientists to confirm exact numbers. In addition, since many

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<sup>219</sup> Tutela Legal del Arzobispado. *Comision Arquidiocesana de Justicia y Paz*. 9

<sup>220</sup> "El Salvador," in *Annual Report 2005*, (Buenos Aires: Equipo Argentino de Antropologia Forense, 2005), 103.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Elinor J. Brecher, "Envoys Wrote of Salvador Abuses," *The Miami Herald*, October 31 2000

civilians fled from town to town during the attacks, it was difficult to pinpoint where the people buried in mass graves originated from.<sup>223</sup>

Despite such difficulties, EAAF was able to confirm 376 deaths, though estimates are between 350 to 500 deaths.<sup>224</sup> It also proved that COPREFA's reports on the number of death and claim of burial were false. Investigators also found coins dated no later than 1981, correlating with the year of the massacre attack and providing another layer of proof that such attacks did occur.<sup>225</sup>

On February 28th, 2011, Pro-Búsqueda helped families of 13 forcibly disappeared children file their first collective complaint before the fiscal office of Usulután to investigate the what had happened, provide justice to the victims, and identify the whereabouts of these disappeared children.<sup>226</sup> Pro-Búsqueda has thus far received 19 complaints of disappeared children from La Quesera. Of these cases, five children were found and reunited with their families: three children were found in France, one child in Belgium, and Beatriz López of the United States was found and reunited with her family in 2012. However, while progress has been made, the majority of families who lost children are still searching for their loved ones.<sup>227</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Massacres of civilian populations in rural areas occurred systematically under the government's assumption that that civilians who did not want to cooperate with the insurgents

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<sup>223</sup> "El Salvador," in *Annual Report 2005*, (Buenos Aires: Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, 2005), 104.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid*, 103-4.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid*, 110.

<sup>226</sup> Asociación Pro- Búsqueda, "Víctimas demandan investigar desapariciones durante la Masacre de La Quesera," accessed January 8, 2015.

<http://www.probusqueda.org.sv/victimas-demandan-investigar-a-la-fiscalia-general-de-la-republica-el-paradero-de-los-ninos-y-ninas-desaparecidos-durante-la-masacre-de-la-quesera/>.

<sup>227</sup> Eugenio Castro, "Massacre La Quesera: Es Tiempo De Recordar" *DiarioCoLatino.com*, January 12 2013

would leave areas with high insurgency presence, which concluded that all who remained in areas with high guerrilla were allegedly collaborators.<sup>228</sup> As the Inter-American Court expresses in its judgment in the El Mozote case,

“The phenomenon of the massacres occurred deliberately as part of a strategy systematically planned by the Armed Forces of El Salvador; [thus] it cannot be argued that the innumerable mass executions of the civilian population were isolated acts of violence of which the senior authorities of the Armed Forces and the Government in power were unaware. To the contrary, they were inserted in and were a central part of a specific counterinsurgency policy of the State.”<sup>229</sup>

While this report provides preliminary information about the massacre, it is only one step in documenting what really transpired in order to recognize El Salvador’s past atrocities and present struggle for restoration and reconciliation after decades of violence. The scope and scale of the killings at La Quesera show that the notorious massacre of El Mozote was not the only incident of violence in the Salvadoran civil war. Much more attention is needed to ensure that such events are not forgotten and that victims and survivors are able to access the truth about the fate of their lost loved ones. As the founder of Pro-Búsqueda Jon Cortina has always insisted, there is a wound among Salvadoran parents, children, and society that cannot heal until people know the truth and justice is done.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Tommie Sue Montgomery. *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace*, Second Edition (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995); 1981 El Salvador Annual Report, Amnesty International

<sup>229</sup> Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Case of the Massacres of El Mozote and neighboring locations v. El Salvador, Merits, Reparations and Costs, Judgment of October 25, 2012, I/A Court H.R., Series C No. 252 (2012).

<sup>230</sup> Laura Briggs, *Somebody’s Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012): 177



## Timeline

Date (all in 1981)	
September 14	Army troops begin ‘search and destroy’ missions against guerrillas in 8 of El Salvador’s 14 provinces, with the heaviest fighting reported in San Vicente and Usulután <sup>231</sup>
September 30	FMLN squad conducted harassment operation against observation post in town of Jucuarán, Usulután Department. Simultaneously, another squad conducted an attack at Marin Bridge over the Rio Grande of San Miguel at Jucuarán jurisdiction <sup>232</sup>
October 15	Oro Bridge destroyed by guerrilla forces <sup>233</sup>
October 17	US advisers in a helicopter witnessed the pilot open fire on a group of Salvadoran peasants. Simultaneously, reported fighting between FMLN and armed forces.
October 20	First official day of the massacre
October 21	Salvadoran government made claims the bridge destruction of the Oro Bridge was not FMLN but by 600 Cuban commandos, claims denied by guerrilla forces. <sup>234</sup>
October 22	FMLN platoon under Compañero Roberto attacked army forces in town of San Francisco Javier. Army reportedly sought refuge in civilian homes. <sup>235</sup>
October 23	Several squads of FMLN fighters on the El Litoral road to Usulután attacked army convoys, resulted in more troops arriving at the scene and guerrilla forces withdrew. <sup>236</sup>

<sup>231</sup> “AROUND THE WORLD; Salvadoran Army Begins Drive Against Rebels,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1981.

<sup>232</sup> “Southeastern Front War Report,” *Radio Venceremos*, Oct. 2 1981.

<sup>233</sup> “AROUND THE WORLD; Rebel Plan Fails at Salvador Bridge,” *New York Times*, October 26, 1981.

<sup>234</sup> “FMLN Denies Reports of Cuban Commandos,” *Radio Venceremos*, October 21, 1981.

<sup>235</sup> “Attacks on Government Troops,” *Radio Venceremos* (October 27, 1981).

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*

October 25	Guerrilla forces attempted to dynamite a railroad bridge 500 meters from the already destroyed Oro bridge, but were detected by the army.
October 26	Troops began to gather in the area, planes seen flying over Chichontepec Volanco. Some planes were transporting Atlacatl Battalion troops while others were performing missions where the guerrilla camps were operating. <sup>237</sup>
October 27	Sixteen army companies, including helicopters, an airborne battalion unit, reconnaissance planes, Atlacatl Battalion, and soldiers from regiments in Usulután and Zacatecoluca attacked regions. <sup>238</sup>
October 28	<p>Army declared zone between Oro bridge and the railroad bridge as a military zone. Area comprises approximately 10 square kilometers around the two bridges.<sup>239</sup></p> <p>Year's largest attack in the area, reportedly 2800 soldiers in region at time. Previous operations of the year involved no more than 2000 soldiers.<sup>240</sup></p>
October 29-30	Supposed last day of La Quesera massacre

<sup>237</sup> "Major Operation Launched," *El Mundo*, October 27, 1981.

<sup>238</sup> "Lempa Bridge Area Fortified," *El Diario De Hoy*, October 28, 1981.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>240</sup> "AROUND THE WORLD; Salvadoran Commandos Raid Rebel Region," *The New York Times*, October 29, 1981.

## Maps

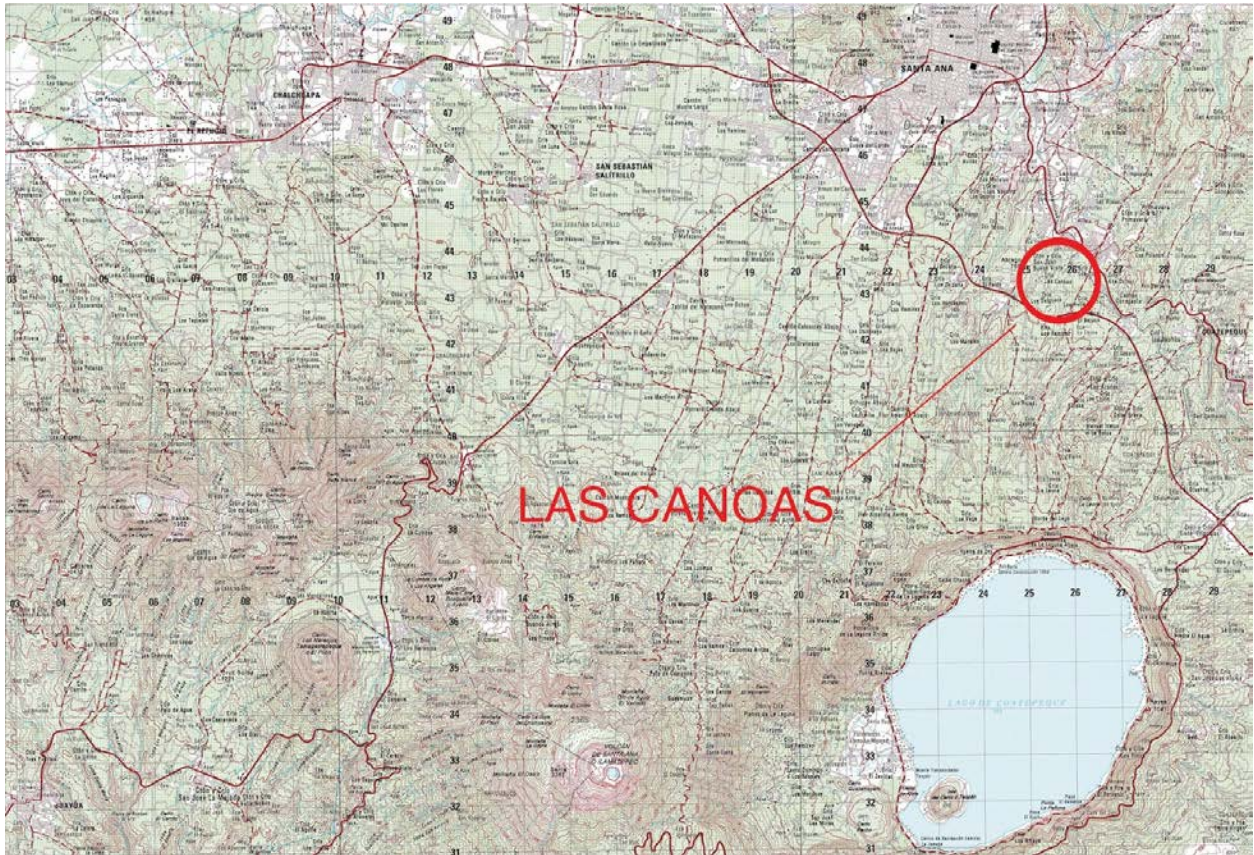


Figure 1<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Fig. 1. *El Salvador Maps*. The University of Texas at Austin.

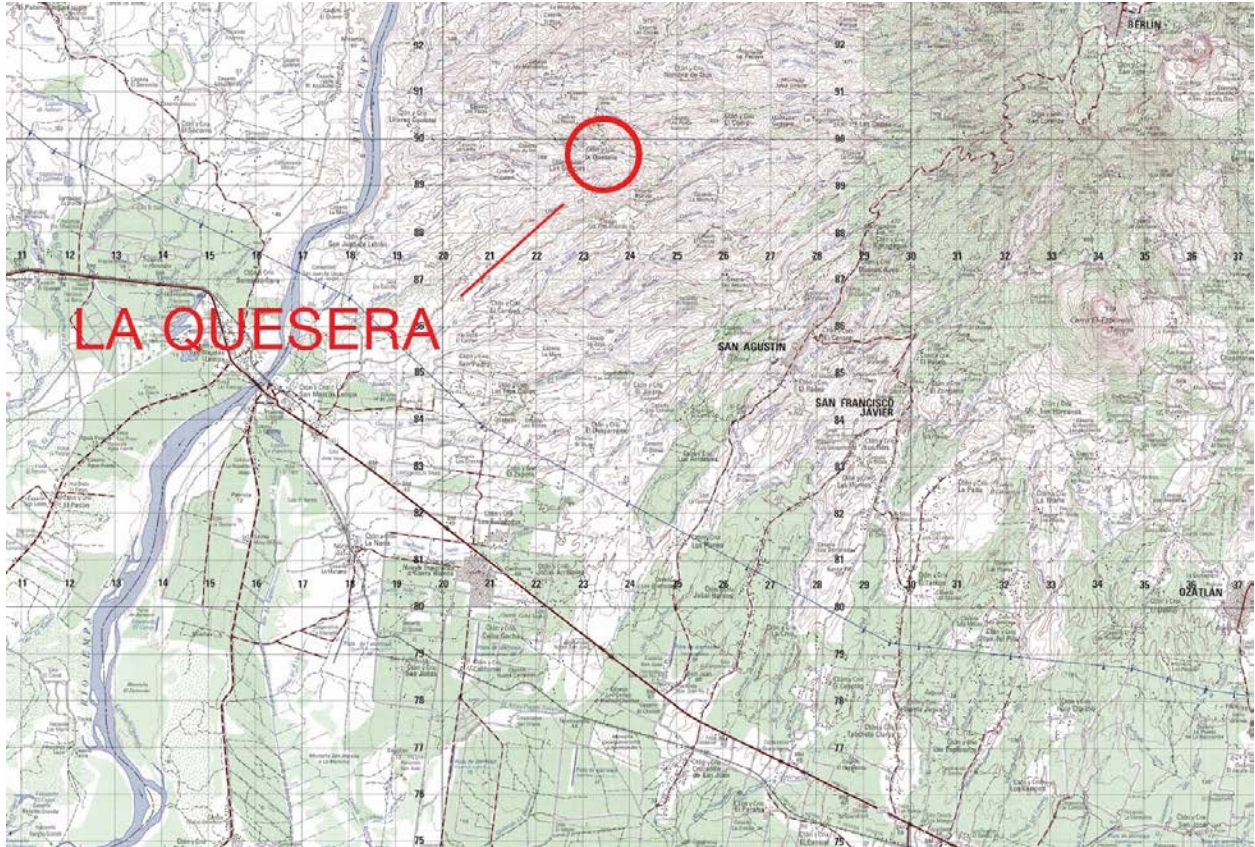


Figure 2<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Fig. 2. *El Salvador Maps*. The University of Texas at Austin.

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