Jailed junta critics tell of death, torture

SAN SALVADOR, 19 March — The Santa Tecla jail for political prisoners is a grim place. From the outside all that is visible are the high walls, painted a light blue over chipped plaster.

The entrance to the prison is an armored door with a small peep-hole. The door is eventually swung open after a study of identification papers.

Inside, several guards stand armed with rifles of unknown manufacture. Then it is through another armored door and into the office of the prison commandant. The prison is dark and the odor nauseating.

The commandant forbids cameras or tape recorders. He is even surprised that a reporter has been allowed to enter the prison, but on verifying the sources of the permissions (the Minister, Colonel Guillermo Garcia), he is reasonably helpful with facts and figures.

The prison records show that there are 138 prisoners here. All are political prisoners. They represent various sectors of the community, including the media, the trade unions and the schools and universities. They are allowed to see the prisoners. They live four or six to a cell and are allowed out to a common area during the day. The common area is cramped, the facilities for cooking and the personal hygiene area primitive, but the men here spend a lot of time trying to make their environment as habitable as possible.

Intellectuals

As many of the prisoners here represent the intellectual strata of El Salvadoran society, they are allowed to be fairly self-governing, within the confines of the space allotted to them and the hours they are allowed out of their cells. They make use of this limited freedom to express grievances, to help each other and to continue to work in a limited way, in their pre-prison profession.

The following interviews with these three groups were conducted in the prison through a chemical engineer who speaks several languages. He was the owner of a successful small business before being imprisoned.

JOURNALISTS: Francisco Ramirez Avezin of "El Independiente" newspaper, which has been closed, and Guillermo Diaz Ramirez of the International Press Agency, were charged with subversive activity.

Speaking through the interpreter they said: "The principal political crime that we were charged with was that of being mediators between the media and the guerrillas. We deny that charge." They said they are women reporters, including the owner of a newspaper, have yet to be brought before a court.

They said: "We were folded and handcuffed and had guns poked into our chests when answering questions before a military judge. We are not criminals. We have not committed any political crimes. We do not know why we are here."

Questioned further, they said they believed they had been imprisoned because they were working with the opposition media. We were being beaten, we were telling the truth."

Melbourne reporter DAMIEN KINGSTON, 25, has been inside the walls of San Salvador's Santa Tecla jail to give this exclusive report of political prisoners' claims of torture and imprisonment.

Reports from inside tell of the authorities killing people.

They said they did not consider telling the truth to be an adequate reason for being imprisoned.

The conditions turned to prison conditions. They said: "We are locked up at 9 pm and are made to sleep with the lights on. We are under constant surveillance. The guards abuse us: they knout us and beat us and aim their rifles through the bars of the cell doors."

A listener to the conversation went away and returned with a man in his mid-30s. He was a high school teacher before being arrested. He said most of the teachers were now dead. Then he showed what the authorities had done to him.

Across his arms, legs, body and face, large areas of skin were bare where, he said, interrogators had thrown sulfuric acid on him in an attempt to get a confession. He had also been electrically administered and had had power on his testicles, he said.

Remarkably, one of the prisoners here was a lecturer in medicine at the university and, with the poor facilities available, helped to clean up his gaping wounds.

The journalists said they received electrical shocks and beatings (the doctors always at Santa Tecla from time to time) but most of the torture was psychological.

They said: "We were tied up and left inside and then left. We would be shot. They tied hands.

The interpreter then said: "They gave me hallucinogenic drugs for 48 hours. I was sent crazy for a week. You will help me to still be alive in two months if you can publish my name in the Press of other countries."

The journalists said the prisoners received little food or supplies from the Government. "If you see us healthy it is because our families give us food. The wealthy people help the poor in this job."

Despite the reasonable well-being of most of the prisoners, many were suffering from ailments caused by the unsanitary conditions and inadequate diet.

On the way to the police park their only outside the prison and they treat our families badly so they get afraid and don't yell. This is to demoralize the prisoners," the journalist said.

"The only reason they treat us this well is because we went on hunger strikes and they were concerned that we would all die together."

They have been more careful over the past two months because of the International Press. The whole world is watching."

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The names of El Salvadoran martyrs are painted on their cell doors. I was told they were put there by jailors, because they were prisoners and most of them were now dead.

The journalists said that before they were arrested, seven newspeople had been killed. They mentioned a production manager of "La Cronica" and a photographer who were found chopped into small pieces after being kidnapped last July.

The popular opinion in El Salvador is that no one who commits these types of crimes, the "paramilitary," are soldiers in civil dress but the two journalists would not say this. A sentence of death comes from such a group.

They said that at the same time that "La Cronica" was closed, the offices of the "Independiente" newspaper and the Catholic Church radio station YSAX were blown up. They added: "All opposition newspapers are now closed," they said. Some of the prisoners held here were printers and secretaries at the newspapers before they were closed. "They had no responsibility for the content of the papers.

They said "the revolutionary junta" had tried to modify the agrarian sector and the banking sector. In the agrarian sector, the National Democratic Organization, similar in style to the Nazis, is preferred by about 60 per cent of the big and middle farmers, and repression increased with this failure. They are mostly illiterate and feel that the revolutionaries are often ignorant of the injustice here.

The journalists made a final appeal: "We need the people's support of salvation here - the international community."

UNIONISTS: Most of the unionists in the prison were members of the Sindico Trabajadores Empresas Comisiones Ecuatorianas Hydroelectric. This union represents the workers of the privatized-owned monopoly of the supply of electricity in El Salvador. Present were the general secretary of the union, Roberto Ramirez, several union secretaries and other members.

They are in jail for a strike which threatened to cause electrical supplies in El Salvador for 24 hours.

They told me the linesmen had worked with 11,000 volts running through live wires. They were being paid about $4.50 a week for this dangerous job. The union held discussions which resulted in 13 unionists being murdered in front of the Union headquarters. Forty-five unionists were arrested and a further 30 were being dismissed.

Through an interpreter they said they believed the government declared the union unconstitutional. They also said, under decree 250, that they cannot talk about political subjects in any way, which includes workers' rights and the deaths of workers. This also included the newspapers: "That is what we went on strike.

The unionists were given the same sort of trial as the journalists but the disturbing thing about their case is that all documentation about them has been destroyed so that they no longer officially exist.

In El Salvador, such a situation has very ominous overtones. But, as they were "true to the cause of the people," they refused to discuss the politics of the country.

"The government does not represent the people. This government does not exist according to the constitution of El Salvador," they said.

"Repression is the first quality of this government because it is not able to resolve the problems of this country. It has no power. The liberty of forming unions is no longer present. Most of the leaders of other unions are now political prisoners at other centers.

The striking unionists at the present time are either missing or dead. Including the teachers' union, 7,000 thousand have disappeared. The teachers suffer a lot from the Government. Most of the unionists will find killing streets and the countryside are teachers' unions. The unionists went on: "We feel that the Democratic Revolutionary Front is the only representative of the people and the prisoners. We would like you to send a message to all of the workers, unionists and people in your country. We hope you will express your support of us in our situation.

Most of the unionists are not allowed to see their families on visiting days. All managed to smile and give me warm handshakes, although it is very likely they will soon be dead.

PROFESSORS: Seven professors had a former employee of the university in San Salvador was the next group I talked with. They were very suspicious that I might be a government agent and asked me to leave. I decided to leave them. They included the director of the university, the head of the technical faculty, the head of the economics faculty and the head of the law faculty.

They said: "The real charge against us is that we belong to the university. This is the last action (by the government) in regard to the university. It is a gross violation of the constitution."

"The campaign against the university began with the second semester" and "the present one.

There had been systematic perse- cution, kidnapping and assassination of professors and students of the university. Hundreds of students and many professors have been assassinated. The university had been surrounded by the army and soldiers who fired on it, killing many people. Exploits had been detonated against the walls of the auditorium while there were students in it and a library was destroyed in a bomb attack.

There was then the final assault on 26 June last year when the university was totally occupied by the troops. The result was 40 deaths. There had been no resistance to the troops by students of the university.

All of the equipment in the university was destroyed or stolen and then sold by the soldiers. A junta command was established to carry out the instruction and that at about $74 million, but it is thought to have been much more.

On 20 October last year the previous director of the university and president of the International University Service based in Geneva, Felix Antonio Ulla, was taken away about 100 meters from the university and assassinated by the paramilitary.

The professors claimed that after they were arrested soldiers went to their homes and imitated their families and said they had found weapons there.

They said: "We were not working in political activity, we were thinking of the university. No charge can be considered against us within the constitution of this country."

The professors claimed that after they were arrested soldiers went to their homes and imitated their families and said they had found weapons there.

They had a final appeal for our assistance; they said, "We have not appeared before a court."

They had had decided that all employees of the university will not receive any further salaries. But we are still working with the same responsibilities from inside the jail."

"This represents one more military action against the people by the government." They said.

They said the government had no legal status. That it was unpopular and was "like Chile and Argentina. They have no respect for any legal or human rights of the people."

"This represents the country's rich rock bottom," they said; "it is a catastrophe situation and the $250 million (President) Duarte is begging from Reagan would not be enough to alter anything because we don't have anything, any productivity in the country to invest the money into."

They said the Democratic Revolutionary Front was an umbrella group which represented many political views and was the only one popular representative of the majority of the people.

The professors then asked if they could thank the universities of the world for their support and the international press for informing the story of the country.

The prisoners of the jail then elected a spokesman who came forward with a request: if the students of the other countries could print their names there would be a better chance that they might one day be heard.

Large letters on a dormitory wall spelled out: "Libertad o Muerte (Death or freedom - we will win)."