

## International



Graffiti at the U. of El Salvador reflect student support for leftist guerrillas. Above: "In each raised fist of the people is a smile, a rifle, and the heart of Farabundo Martí."

PHOTOGRAPH FOR THE CHRONICLE BY JOHN KUYKENDALL

# *A Beleaguered Outpost of Higher Education Endures El Salvador's Bloody Civil War*

By MIKE TANGEMAN

SAN SALVADOR

For years, the national University of El Salvador here has been one of Latin America's most beleaguered institutions of higher education. It was closed by the army from 1980 to 1984, ripped by a severe earthquake in 1986, and, in the weeks leading up to last month's presidential election, assaulted by a band of armed men and surrounded by army troops.

Now, as a newly elected rightist government prepares to take over from President José Napoleón Duarte and his Christian Democratic Party, few people expect the university's troubles to end anytime soon.

The university's rector, José Luis Argüeta Antillón, charged recently that Salvadoran President-Elect Alfredo Cristiani

intended to "wrest custody of higher education away from the national university" by cutting government funds and promoting the development of private institutions.

### 30 New Private Institutions

A spokeswoman for Mr. Cristiani's Nationalist Republican Alliance said she could neither confirm nor deny the accusation. But in any case, the swing to private higher education is already well along, with more than 30 private institutions having been established with the Duarte government's encouragement over the past decade.

In addition, Mr. Argüeta has claimed on several occasions that the United States Embassy here has joined the Salvadoran

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CHRONICLE PHOTOGRAPH BY MIKE TANGEMAN

**Rector José Luis Argüeta Antillón:** The university is seeking through a new program to "provide answers and solutions to concrete national problems."



# A Beleaguered Outpost of Higher Education Endures the Bloody Civil War in El Salvador

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government in blocking the distribution of American earthquake-relief money to the university because they regard it as a stronghold of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, the leftist guerrilla movement commonly referred to as the F.M.L.N.

Embassy officials have denied the rector's charge. Mr. Argüeta, in turn, has insisted that the sympathy that the guerrillas enjoy among the university's 35,000 students is merely an example of the "free play of ideas" in action—a part of the "ideological pluralism" that the institution encourages—rather than a reflection of university policy.

But in a country polarized by nine years of civil war, that explanation is not good enough for Col. René Emilio Ponce, head of the Armed Forces High Command.

"The university is a center of sub-

version," Colonel Ponce bluntly asserted after the army cordoned off the campus shortly before last Christmas in a virtual military siege that lasted nearly three weeks.

## Troops on Constant Patrol

Everyone entering and leaving the university was searched, and troops were on constant patrol along the perimeter of the campus.

"The F.M.L.N. has arms stored on the campus," the officer explained.

That charge, though unproved, is far from new. Ever since the university was allowed to reopen in 1984, the military has repeatedly alleged that the institution serves as a training ground and an arms cache for the guerrillas.

The attitude of many students is clearly seen in campus graffiti. "Long live the urban commandos," reads a slogan that has been daubed in red across the façade of the univer-

sity's earthquake-damaged administration building.

But there is a lot more to campus opinions than meets the eye.

Despite all its troubles, the University of El Salvador is a vibrant place—a battered institution that nevertheless continues to thrive because thousands of students seem determined, against the odds, to get an education.

The enrollment has increased 6 per cent since 1987.

About three-fourths of the students come from working-class and peasant families that they help support by working in part-time or even full-time jobs during the day before attending late-afternoon and evening classes.

It is, moreover, a university with a mission. Caught in the morass of the civil war, which has claimed an estimated 70,000 lives and severely dislocated the national economy, many students and faculty members say they are dedicated to ending El Salvador's chronic underdevelopment.

They see higher education as a beacon of hope in a country where illiteracy runs as high as 60 per cent in the countryside, where 82 per cent of all rural inhabitants earn less than \$225 a year, and where 2 per cent of the total population of 5.2 million receives a third of the national income.

Against that background, university students constitute an elite group accounting for just over 1 per cent of the population.

## 'Answers and Solutions'

Mr. Argüeta explained in a recent interview that the university wants to "provide answers and solutions to concrete national problems" at the same time it seeks to enhance the body of knowledge in various disciplines.

Sitting in a makeshift office in the kitchen of what was once the student cafeteria—the earthquake made the administration building unsafe—the rector described a new program to accomplish those goals.

It includes new curricular and degree requirements, new methods of teaching and research, and an emphasis on field work, he said, adding that the field work enables students and faculty members to learn firsthand about the "national reality" of social and economic inequality.

Mr. Argüeta acknowledged that such an educational focus implied social action, as well—and that, he

said, would "definitely generate resistance" from supporters of the *status quo* in the government and the military.

Many Salvadoran students and faculty members agree, however, that there is little room in their polarized society for a middle ground. They also know that in becoming agents for social change they become targets for violence, as well.

Indeed, such an understanding has been a basic part of higher education's recent history in this country.

In 1979 and 1980, savage attacks on opponents of the government by the military and right-wing death squads convinced administrators at the University of El Salvador that the institution should take sides.

## Rector Murdered in 1980

The rector at the time, Félix Antonio Ulloa, signed the university on as a founding member of the opposition Democratic Revolutionary Front. That group, an amalgam of social-democrat and leftist political movements known as the F.D.R., later joined an alliance with the F.M.L.N. after the F.D.R.'s entire executive board was murdered.

Mr. Ulloa himself was murdered by a death squad in October 1980. Four months earlier, the Salvadoran military had reacted to the university's political involvement by moving troops and tanks onto the campus. About two dozen students were killed and more than 100 were wounded.

During the four years of army occupation that followed, the university sustained an estimated \$20-million in property damage.

The University of El Salvador was not the only academic target. Across town, the Jesuit-run Central American University also felt the fire of a right-wing backlash for having promoted social change.

## At Odds With Landed Oligarchy

For more than a decade the 7,000-student institution had been at odds with El Salvador's landed oligarchy for having sponsored the country's first public symposiums on land reform. In 1978-79, recalls the Rev. Segundo Montes, director of the university's Institute of Human Rights, campus activism there was countered by the kidnaping, torture, and murder of student leaders.

In a March 1980 attack on the campus by uniformed members of the

National Police, one student was shot dead, several others were wounded, and dozens were arrested.

Officials at Central American University then decided to take a stand, too, and they participated as observers at the F.D.R.'s founding ceremony. A series of bombings of campus buildings by paramilitary groups followed.

## Violence Ends Political Activism

The violence effectively put an end to open political activism by students at the university, Father Montes said not long ago.

"The student organizations disintegrated—some because of fear or repression, others because they joined the armed struggle," he said.

Even today, politically active students at the university prefer to keep a low profile "as a security measure," Father Montes said, because the violence has continued.

Two months ago, he noted, several students at Central American University were kidnaped, and others were threatened by right-wing death squads.

Then, shortly before last month's election, someone lobbed a grenade into the university's emergency power plant, and the explosion disrupted the campus's electrical supply for several days.

## Repeated Death Threats

Three months earlier, about 50 armed men, some in military uniform, had managed to penetrate the cordon around the University of El Salvador. They entered the campus, killed a security guard, and planted a bomb that damaged offices and classrooms in the biology building.

In Mr. Argüeta's view, the Salvadoran military is contributing to the violence as part of an unforgiving strategy of counterinsurgency.

"They place those who support the counterinsurgency program at one pole," he said, "while any person, any organization, any institution that does not back the counterinsurgency plan is placed at the other pole—with the insurgents themselves."

In recent weeks, Mr. Argüeta has received repeated threats against his life.

Death squads also have threatened to kill Ignacio Ellacuría, rector of Central American University. He is an outspoken proponent of a negotiated settlement of the conflict.