

## THE WORLD

# El Salvador: a Canadian looks in the mirror

If there is hope and justice in the vision of a free El Salvador, than we must go beyond simple humanitarianism. **Brian Murphy** travels the road from the October Crisis to El Salvador and back

We had spent the day in the east of El Salvador meeting with agricultural co-operatives. These co-operatives have a long tradition in El Salvador and are working valiantly in the small legal space available to revive the small-farm sector essential to their livelihood and the future of El Salvador. We were there examining ways that Canadian non-governmental agencies can assist these efforts.

It was late afternoon as we sped along the Pan-American highway to get back to San Salvador by nightfall, when we came fast upon a convoy of five military personnel carriers on a long stretch of open road. Suddenly the road became a battlefield, scores of soldiers leaping from the trucks and firing wildly into the broad expanse of open paddy at the side of the road. The chaos of gunfire was chilling as we stopped sharply about one hundred yards from the melee of soldiers, frantic from their exposure to an invisible ambush from the paddy below. The three of us in the open flatbed leapt from the back of the truck and, dashing for the cover of the ditch, stumbled back through the bramble for the cover of the last curve. We could see the bursts of smoke from mortar shells exploding in the open area beside the road, as



Photo: UNHCR/P. Jambor

our adrenalin carried us beyond the range of the battle. As a Canadian worker wryly said to me later, "Welcome to El Salvador . . .". But this had not been my welcome, nor would it be my lasting impression of El Salvador. Combat is a fact in the life of the countryside, but neither the most important nor most impressive fact. Our visit to El Salvador was a privileged time and raised again many questions about how Canadians can respond to this critical juncture in the history of our hemisphere. It was very much a visit in which my past was challenged by encounters with the future . . .

### Challenging the past

From 1968-1970 I lived in Nigeria during the last agonies of the Nigerian civil war, the "Biafran War". During this period I puzzled about the ambiguities of the Canadian response to this tragedy and the ragged "solidarity" efforts of that tumultuous time.

When I returned to Canada in the late summer of 1970, the Biafran war was gone from public memory and the obsession of the late 60s had created no apparent lessons. I returned to Vietnam demonstrations and the October Crisis. The experience of curfews and armed soldiers on the streets of Hull and Ottawa was a shock so soon after living in militarized West Africa, and the repression in the air was much more real than I had ever felt in two years of "Military Rule" in Nigeria, and have not felt since until my visit to El Salvador.

What continued to puzzle me in a very inarticulate way, was the clearly inadequate response of myself and other Canadians — public and private — to the world which was unfolding around our sheltered political and cultural shores. We did not understand Africa, although evidence was mounting that our interventions there were profoundly destructive. The heroic anti-

apartheid movement — the one protest group which never gave up — was a lonely voice against the travesty of South Africa (a voice now heard loudly, and too late, by conservative forces scrambling to moderate the inevitable).

October 1970 receded into the folklore of one man's charisma and arrogance, apparently no more or less significant than a nation's love-hate relationship with the quintessential patriarch. Vietnam faded as an issue, floating ominously away with the last U.S. helicopter skulking off from Saigon rooftops. The crime of the gutting of Cambodia never hit the streets, although now we recoil at our ignorance of the "killing fields" that emerged from the destruction of this tiny nation. Canada's role in the pillage of Southeast Asia was not considered. Our self-effacing humility had one clear benefit — no power, no guilt. (This complicity continues today as, for example, over \$1 billion in Canadian business investments in Indonesia, including the pro-active role of the Canadian government in promoting military sales, is enough to keep our foreign policy in this region both silent and compliant).

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### *Canada was at best a weak Polonius, all artifice*

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Like many others I spent the 70s immersed in more local issues of Canadian social development. But even here our work was affected by the shadow and the light of international events, and our work was heavily influenced by practices emerging in the Third World. In my case, work on a Master's thesis on the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, in the early 70s led to an ever-deepening frustration that it was impossible to combat the structural causes of poverty and illiteracy in Canada without engaging in more radical social processes and, ultimately, internationalizing our work. It was also becoming clear that Canada's future was being determined in North-South struggles, not East-West struggles, and that on this stage Canada was at best a weak Polonius, all artifice, more concerned with accidental affluence and security than larger moral and historical questions which were issues of life and

humanity for hundreds of millions living beyond our privilege. I slipped, almost by coincidence, back into the field of international development.

**Grenada, 1983.** My work took me to Maurice Bishop's Grenada. Who could see what was happening there? Grenada was carrying this incredible baggage of international rhetoric and competing ideological agendas. It became a bit of a tourist revolution, with sun and calypso:

the solidarity tours were fine to this island paradise of slightly more than one hundred thousand people, but in the end we were unable to help or protect it.

The work in Grenada was good, and, frankly, not very radical. The programs of people like Bishop and Jackie Creft (graduates of York and Carleton Universities, respectively) and their comrades were excellent textbook reforms, the theoretical base for which was already commonplace

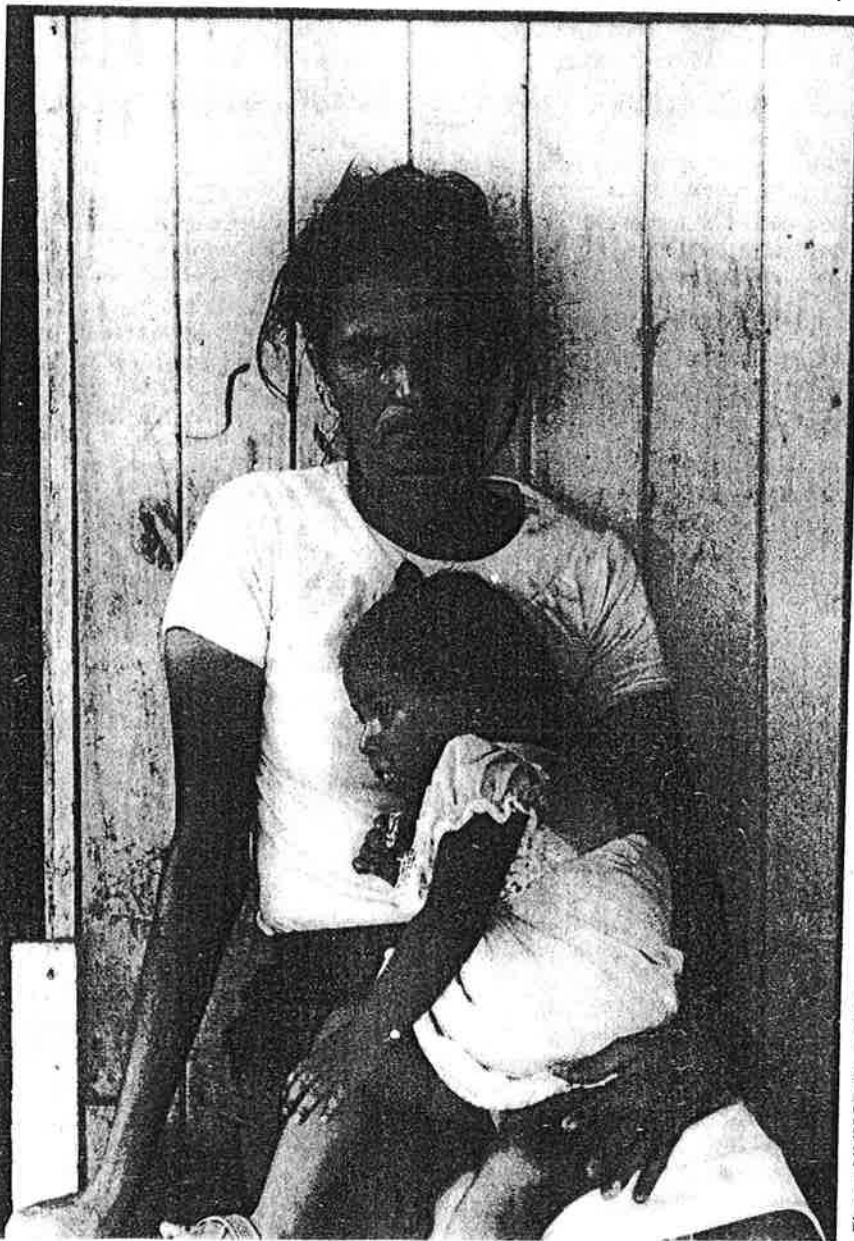


Photo: UNHCR/P. Jambor

El Salvadoran refugee: "These people will win, they have taken control of their future."

in social development literature. They were classic reforms — land reform, crop diversification, small manufacturing and food processing for local consumption, primary health care, adult education, co-op development, reforms which are absolutely essential for every developing nation in the world struggling for self-sufficiency within a resource-based economy. The threat of tiny Grenada (and of struggling Nicaragua) to international “stability” was that it was working — a fact clearly stated by the World Bank in late 1982; it was a threat to an international economic system which cannot tolerate new and instructive models.

### **Outspoken courage and protest**

By early 1983 it was becoming clear that the United States would not tolerate the success, or the rhetoric, of the New

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### ***In El Salvador you can smell the breath of the devil.***

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Jewel Movement. There was open talk that the NJM had been infiltrated by agent provocateurs. Yet when the end came in October 1983 it seemed so sudden, so suicidal and stupid. The solidarity workers mourned. Trudeau carried on about being left in the dark — our image exposed to cruel light by Eugenia Charles of Dominica. And mainstream Canadians had one more lesson on barbaric Marxism, violent Third World nations, and U.S. power. No Analysis. The only hint of fundamental critique came from three tired CUSO workers — Green, Brand and Thomas — whose outspoken courage and protest in the face of the bizarre events remains one of CUSO's finest moments.

When I re-visited Grenada a few months after the U.S. invasion I was astounded at how fast and how complete was the destruction of the cultural and political gains of the Grenadian revolution. I was awed, not for the first time, but more personally, at the absolute power of the international forces which will prevent, at all cost, the emergence of any movement for independence from the prevailing international economic structures. And I left Grenada more clearly wonder-

ing why the progressive forces of the “left”, whether Socialist, humanist, or religious, were completely inadequate to a meaningful confrontation with economic imperialism and its bully-boy tactics. I returned from Grenada mourning not Grenada — those people are strong and have their own history — but mourning the internationalist movement in Canada, and Canada itself. The Grenada adventure revealed what, and who, we were. The impotence of Grenada was our impotence, and we seemed neither aware of this, nor capable of exploring it.

**El Salvador, 1985.** In El Salvador you can smell the breath of the devil. The face of El Salvador notorious to the world presses you, and crowds in on your nerves. Taxi drivers on the way from the airport point out the site of the outrage against the four American nuns, (how is it possible you wonder, that this thing occurred on the main highway between the airport and the capital city), and later they point out the restaurant in the Santa Rosa section of San Salvador where four American military advisors were slaughtered last year along with a number of Salvadoran bystanders.

And one leaves El Salvador, inevitably, with anecdotes, often chilling, of scrapes with security police, quirky encounters with the Guerilla, and in our case, the gut-wrenching brush with close combat on the Pan-American. But these anecdotes do not enhance the clarity of our insight (in fact they blind us a bit), nor provoke our analysis.

In El Salvador the most important reality is not the slouching military evil of greed and oppression, nor is it the determined courage of the sparse FMLN guerilla forces. The reality which moves so deeply is the people: the history, the spirit, the courage, and the will of the Salvadoran people. These people will win: they have taken control of their future. At what cost, and with what quality of participation from us, is the key question.

How to express this without cliché? The optimism of international development work comes from working with persons, individuals and groups of profound force, talent and conviction, whether in South Africa, Southeast Asia, in Grenada and the rest of the Caribbean, in Nicaragua, or in El Salvador. It is this reality, this power and spirit, not the ideological grid used to

explain and debate, which is the unfolding history of the “Third World”. It is the unfolding history of El Salvador and, indeed, our hemisphere.

Somehow the language of international solidarity has to be refined to communicate this fundamental reality, a reality which will be a critical force in shaping our own future.

**I** have returned from El Salvador with the nagging question, which began years ago in Africa, now raging in my mind — what role will we play in all of this? What is the adequate response, from me, for the “left”, for progressive movements, and for Canadians in general? Will we fail the critical moment again, eager bystanders, political cheerleaders, impotent because we can't risk the risks, while others die for our future?

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### ***We must promote change in Canada, not just in far-away exotic lands.***

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What we Canadians in general cannot see is that our future is being formed in El Salvador. What is at stake in Central America is first and foremost, *national independence*, explicitly *independence from the United States* and its international economic and political control. Second, what is at stake is a *new vision of society*, and human political relationships, a vision which is (inevitably) Marxist in derivation, but clearly post-Christian. Third, what is at stake is a *new international order* based in new constructs and constraints of power and interdependence. Fourth, what is at stake is *world peace* based in mutual human respect for the meek and the strong in an international society. This last, peace, is a real issue, because the superpowers can no longer win. The people will not stop, the wars will escalate, merge, and ultimately engulf us all, since the superpowers can only “win” by unleashing their full power, which will mean engaging each other, and each of us. National autonomy, a new person in a new society, internationalism, world peace — these are what are at stake in El Salvador, for the Salvadorans, for

Central Americans, and for ourselves, since the achievement of these aims will affect us whether we participate or not, as will the defeat of these aims affect us.

### Far forward, or very far back

Are these "idealistic" notions? The question is blind to history. It is no longer a question of "idealism", as a visit to El Salvador, or Nicaragua (or South Africa or the Philippines) reveals with profound impact. A new balance has been achieved in the forces (past a certain point military might is a liability) and we can only go far forward, or very far back. Both choices are real, and it is the most perverse idealism to persist to believe otherwise. The status quo is no longer an option.

More important, I believe there is a considerable segment of mainstream Canadian society made up of persons who share these aims as a vision of *their own society* — national autonomy, a just society, internationalism and world peace. If we can change the ground rules for political debate in this country and refine the language of international solidarity, there is evidence that a much broader popular base can be mobilized in Canada to engage these issues on their own terms.

Why is the struggle in El Salvador so critical? The primary concern of the U.S. in Central America is El Salvador. The U.S. knows that, because of the crippling effect of the Somoza years, Nicaragua is not, and could not be for decades, a major force or threat in Central America, even if left entirely alone. But El Salvador, with its five million people (in a country about one quarter the size of Nicaragua) has decades of solid popular (and pre-revolutionary) organization with a sophisticated political base. It is relatively industrialized with considerable technical and organizational expertise. Salvadorans are renowned for their resourcefulness, and their agricultural productivity and ingenuity is legendary. El Salvador is a nation with all the resources for fundamental independence and self-sufficiency, and for regional leadership. Far from its popular image of a tiny backwater in vicious turmoil — a society at war with itself — El Salvador is a fairly large society of immense complexity and sophistication waging its final war for independence from exclusive American domination. It is a nation which will clearly become a force for change in this hemisphere and a force for a new international order.

The question as it has emerged for me is whether we identify with the vision of El Salvadoran nationalism and the wider struggle for independence in Central America, not as a humanitarian issue but as a deeply political issue which affects us. If we fear this vision (it is a threat to the status quo) we had better get off the fence, because the U.S. is our standard bearer and needs all the solidarity it can get! But if we do see hope and justice in this vision, for Canadians as well as Salvadorans, and if we have a sense of the kind of history which might unfold — not just in five years or ten, but over the next several decades — then we must get out from behind simple humanitarianism and social agnosticism, and begin a more fundamental nationalist struggle here at home. We will have to take this struggle and this vision to our own society to become activists for a new Canada in a new international order. This means promoting fundamental change in Canada, not just in far-away exotic lands; and promoting radical departures in our foreign policy and in our relationship with the United States.

It means, dare we say it, becoming more clearly a broad-based and open conspiracy for our own economic and cultural revolution, a process which begins to move Canada towards an authentic historical relationship with the next epoch of human development, which has begun in the nations of the South.

The reason Canada is inadequate as a nation on the international stage is that it is inadequate as a nation in its own sphere. As I faced the mirror of El Salvador I was forced to recognize that as concerned Canadians we too are inadequate, because we get caught up in supporting other people's struggles rather than waging our own struggle for fundamental change at home.

One day in El Salvador, after a long trek deep down mountain trails to a quiet hamlet snuggled in a valley near the Honduran border, we sat resting in the cool shade of an adobe hut watching the children play. Strangely, in the midst of war, it was one of the most tranquil moments in my life. I felt truly at home, and inevitably my thoughts turned to my own home and my own children. There was a unity in that moment in which the homes were one, and the children were one, and the world to be changed was one. I think that it was that moment when the conclu-

sion which had emerged over fifteen years became irresistible — that it was impossible, even meaningless, to support peace and change here in this village in El Salvador unless we participated in much more concerted action to bring about change in Canada as well. It also seemed clear that such change could only come through the kind of cross-sectoral co-operation and collaboration in Canada that we see in El Salvador.

What is required is a more coherent Canadian movement to clearly and directly confront poverty, injustice, militarism an irrational economies within Canada as well as without.

This presumes a working, if informal, coalition which involves, for example, those in the Peace movement, promoting industrial conversion of the military industry; those in the environmental movement pressuring for corporate social accountability; anti-poverty activists working with the 5 million poor in this country; economic nationalists trying to force an informed debate on "free" trade; civil libertarians and human rights activists; as well as internationalists promoting clear and independent policies on issues as diverse as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) or American militarism in Central America and the mid-East.

Working for a new international order which will guarantee peace, security and dignity to all of us in the planet means working for an independent Canadian economy based on interdependence with the South, independence from the U.S., and social and economic justice at home. Solidarity with independence movements in El Salvador and elsewhere presumes independence here, and takes on real meaning when it ceases to be charity and humanitarian support, and begins to be co-operation and collaboration based on mutual self-interest. This assumes changing ourselves as well as others, and making changes at home as well as abroad. These reflections may seem a long way from the Pan-American highway, and further still from Biafra. But the route to here is rarely a straight line. My sense is that, by many different routes, many different people and movements are coming to these conclusions. The challenge is to come together to honour the privilege of our long education.

