Guest Opinion: The Other War in Central America

Stephen Callahan
El Barrillo is a farming cooperative of 400 people in the shadow of the Guazapa Volcano thirty miles north of San Salvador. Its inhabitants eke out a bare subsistence farming, by hand, a few fields of beans, maize and melons. Like most Salvadorans, they are Roman Catholic, and their faith is as important to their survival as their work.

To get to El Barrillo, we drove north from the capital along the main highway to the town of Suchitoto, its buildings pockmarked by bullets and painted with revolutionary slogans, then west onto a dirt road descending into a jungle forest. At several points we were stopped by government soldiers, and we waited while they confirmed our written authorization to be in what is called a “conflicted area.”

As we charted nervously with the young troops, I was reminded of Vietnam, not so much because of the jungle atmosphere as by the U.S. fatigues they wore and the M-16s they carried... and the eerie smile of the combat soldiers. They belonged to the infamous Atlacatl Battalion which swept into the Guazapa area in January of 1986 in an operation code-named "Phoenix.”

Operation Phoenix marked the beginning of a new strategy by the Salvadoran Army to pacify areas of guerrilla activity by depopulating the villages and destroying the land to deprive the guerrillas of support. In El Barrillo the houses and fields were burned and the villagers were rounded up and taken to a government detention center. During the sweep, many of the unarmed villagers, including women, were killed by government troops, and some fled to tunnels dug into the hillsides where they hid for weeks without food. From the detention center the villagers were released to a relocation camp run by the Catholic Church at San Jose de Calle Real, a sanctuary for peasants uprooted by the war, where they are safe from arrest by police and harassment by the army. This is no small measure of protection because arrest in El Salvador on suspicion of subversive activity invariably means a confession induced by torture if necessary and unlimited detention without trial.

After a few months at Calle Real the people of El Barrillo decided to return to their village and reclaim their land and their lives. They did so at considerable risk in violation of military orders, and succeeded only because they were accompanied by church officials. They have built new houses and plowed new fields a few miles from their old village, and the military operations continue around them.

When we arrived at El Barrillo, a fire set by government troops raged down a nearby hillside, but our hosts seemed unconcerned. They spoke to us about everything but the war: the new irrigation canal they were building, the young girls who have been trained for perhaps a day or a week to be health workers, the “women’s field” farmed by the women of the cooperative and always their faith, that they are part of God’s plan. While they shared their food with us, we could see the evidence of malnutrition in the wide watery eyes of the children.

During the past several years the war in El Salvador has become the United States’ war. We now pay the entire cost of the war, except for the food and salaries of the soldiers. Ambassador Edwin Corr left little doubt about the weight of American influence or the stake we have in winning the war. He felt that the tide of war had turned in favor of the Salvadoran Army and predicted that victory could be achieved in another seven years if we “stay the course.” The FMLN rebels and what remains of the left in El Salvador after the years of death-squad killings are promoting a dialogue to end the war, but the ambassador expressed little interest in negotiations. Instead, he suggested that it is time for the rebels to lay down their arms and enter the political arena citing improvements in human rights and the political system.

While it is true that the death squads have been less active in the past few years, those responsible for the tens of thousands of killings still hold positions in the police and military and are unlikely ever to be brought to justice. As one human rights watcher put it: “There’s been no improvement, just less killing.” The rebels understand that to lay down their arms is suicide. Although there have been elections, President Napoleon Duarte’s ruling Christian Democratic Party can generate little real support beyond that of the United States and the army.

Slowly the United States is creating a new reality in El Salvador, but it is reality that has only the trappings of democracy and no real system of justice. The poor like those in El Barrillo have no political power and no prospect for economic opportunity. By imposing our will on the Salvadoran people, we may protect our interests in the short run, but the result will be an American protectorate which sacrifices freedom and justice for security. Visiting El Barrillo made that clear to me.

GUEST Opinion

The Other War in Central America

BY STEPHEN CALLAHAN

El Barrillo is a farming cooperative of 400 people in the shadow of the Guazapa Volcano thirty miles north of San Salvador. Its inhabitants eke out a bare subsistence farming, by hand, a few fields of beans, maize and melons. Like most Salvadorans, they are Roman Catholic, and their faith is as important to their survival as their work.

I visited El Barrillo in January of this year with a group of university professors on a fact-finding tour of El Salvador and Nicaragua. The central fact in El Salvador is the war, now eight years long, between the guerrillas of the FMLN (Faribundo Marti National Liberation Front) and the Salvadoran Army. The peasants of El Barrillo are caught in the middle.

To get to El Barrillo, we drove north from the capital along the main highway to the town of Suchitoto, its buildings pockmarked by bullets and painted with revolutionary slogans, then west onto a dirt road descending into a jungle forest. At several points we were stopped by government soldiers, and we waited while they confirmed our written authorization to be in what is called a “conflicted area.” As we charted nervously with the young troops, I was reminded of Vietnam, not so much because of the jungle atmosphere as by the U.S. fatigues they wore and the M-16s they carried... and the eerie smile of the combat soldiers. They belonged to the infamous Atlacatl Battalion which swept into the Guazapa area in January of 1986 in an operation code-named “Phoenix.”

Operation Phoenix marked the beginning of a new strategy by the Salvadoran Army to pacify areas of guerrilla activity by depopulating the villages and destroying the land to deprive the guerrillas of support. In El Barrillo the houses and fields were burned and the villagers were rounded up and taken to a government detention center. During the sweep, many of the unarmed villagers, including women, were killed by government troops, and some fled to tunnels dug into the hillsides where they hid for weeks without food. From the detention center the villagers were released to a relocation camp run by the Catholic Church at San Jose de Calle Real, a sanctuary for peasants uprooted by the war, where they are safe from arrest by police and harassment by the army. This is no small measure of protection because arrest in El Salvador on suspicion of subversive activity invariably means a confession induced by torture if necessary and unlimited detention without trial.

After a few months at Calle Real the people of El Barrillo decided to return to their village and reclaim their land and their lives. They did so at considerable risk in violation of military orders, and succeeded only because they were accompanied by church officials. They have built new houses and plowed new fields a few miles from their old village, and the military operations continue around them.

When we arrived at El Barrillo, a fire set by government troops raged down a nearby hillside, but our hosts seemed unconcerned. They spoke to us about everything but the war: the new irrigation canal they were building, the young girls who have been trained for perhaps a day or a week to be health workers, the “women’s field” farmed by the women of the cooperative and always their faith, that they are part of God’s plan. While they shared their food with us, we could see the evidence of malnutrition in the wide watery eyes of the children.

During the past several years the war in El Salvador has become the United States’ war. We now pay the entire cost of the war, except for the food and salaries of the soldiers. Ambassador Edwin Corr left little doubt about the weight of American influence or the stake we have in winning the war. He felt that the tide of war had turned in favor of the Salvadoran Army and predicted that victory could be achieved in another seven years if we “stay the course.” The FMLN rebels and what remains of the left in El Salvador after the years of death-squad killings are promoting a dialogue to end the war, but the ambassador expressed little interest in negotiations. Instead, he suggested that it is time for the rebels to lay down their arms and enter the political arena citing improvements in human rights and the political system.

While it is true that the death squads have been less active in the past few years, those responsible for the tens of thousands of killings still hold positions in the police and military and are unlikely ever to be brought to justice. As one human rights watcher put it: “There’s been no improvement, just less killing.” The rebels understand that to lay down their arms is suicide. Although there have been elections, President Napoleon Duarte’s ruling Christian Democratic Party can generate little real support beyond that of the United States and the army.

Slowly the United States is creating a new reality in El Salvador, but it is reality that has only the trappings of democracy and no real system of justice. The poor like those in El Barrillo have no political power and no prospect for economic opportunity. By imposing our will on the Salvadoran people, we may protect our interests in the short run, but the result will be an American protectorate which sacrifices freedom and justice for security. Visiting El Barrillo made that clear to me.

STEPHEN CALLAHAN, Associate Professor of Law, Suffolk University Law School