

The many lives of El Salvador's leftist leaders

By Ann Nelson

(Editor's Note: The six Salvadoran opposition leaders murdered by right-wing death squads and police last week knew all along that they lived on the violent margin of death. Like other opposition leaders before them -- and like those who have already succeeded them -- they accepted the risks, knowing that when and if they were killed other were prepared to take the roles of leadership in the escalating civil war.)

PNS - "Our organizations are legal, but the punishment for membership is death," said the late 23-year-old Salvadoran leader of the Movement for Popular Liberation (MLP), Luis Diaz.

"We have to be careful about who shows his face in public, but we have to present someone as a figure, as a point of reference, for the students and the workers. It's a risk that you run that they'll kill you. You have to lead a pretty terrible life."

In August, just two months after speaking those words, Luis Diaz was captured by a combined force of military and civilian death squads. He has not been seen since. On November 27, Diaz's successor, 24-year-old Humberto Mendoza, was captured, tortured and killed -- also by military and paramilitary forces -- along with five other prominent leftist leaders in the Salvadoran civil war.

The following day a new leader of the MLP was named by the organization and presented to the public -- the third in four months. He, too, will soon confront the reality that to be a publically identified leader of an opposition organization in El Salvador is to be constantly courting, and avoiding, the death squads.

As Luis Diaz said: "The death squads don't take a vacation... It's a difficult game. You know that you may die. But you also know that because of your work there will be three or four people ready to take your place."

The November 27 assassinations of six members of the Democratic Revolutionary Front wiped out more than half of the coalition's top leadership. They had been preparing a press conference at a Catholic boy's school when the building was surrounded by more than one hundred armed men, including police. The six leaders were taken away in unmarked cars. Their bodies, riddled with bullets and bearing signs of torture, were found near Lake Ilopango, six miles outside the capital, a few hours later.

The press conference was one of the many dangerous responsibilities undertaken by the "Caras" (faces) -- those who publicly represent the left opposition. Only two weeks earlier, two of the leaders had held a similar press conference at the same site in which they had firmly stated their commitment to pluralism in the left coalition. Any government supported by the group, said one leader, would not employ "quotas of power" and would have to represent a wide array of democratic interests.

In fact, contrary to Salvadoran government or U.S. State Department claims, the Democratic Front is anything but monolithic. The pluralist nature of its membership and leadership was clearly evident in the contrasts between two of the Front's best known leaders, both of whom were killed last week.

Fifty-year-old Enrique "Quique" Alvarez was a millionaire cattleman and a debonaire "chele," a light-skinned Salvadoran of Spanish descent and a member of the country's ruling oligarchy of 14 families. There was something of the tenacious dreamer in him. He resigned as El Salvador's Minister of Agriculture under three different regimes, his proposed reforms always having been thwarted. Finally he adopted a successful peasant cooperative system, contributing his own land for the model.

As a moderate social democrat, Alvarez had close ties in the European political community and deeply impressed North American liberals with his warmth and intelligence when he toured the United States and Canada to present the Front's case earlier this year.

Despite the obvious problems of being a homosexual in a machista society, Alvarez was often named as the favorite to head a provisional government. He was a natural peacemaker, with an ironic smile,

and those he could not convince, it was said, he could charm.

At 24 years of age, Juan Chacon could hardly have been more different. At the time of his death last week, Chacon had already spent a number of years as a political prisoner. He had a brush with international celebrity last spring when U.S. Ambassador Robert White prematurely deplored his murder to the American Chamber of Commerce in San Salvador. There was no love lost between them. In an interview a few weeks after White's comments, Chacon said that White must have made the slip because he

was planning something. White's only word for Chacon was "crazy."

Chacon grew up in the northern zone of Chalatenango. His father, Felipe Chacon, was an important lay leader in a ground-breaking Christian community at the vanguard of the country's Theology of Liberation movement. In late 1977, in the first wave of repression under General Carlos Romero's regime, the community was broken up, the younger Chacon was imprisoned and his father was skinned alive.

Chacon has the aura of an early Christian stoic. His strong Indian

features and heavy black brow could look fierce, but the impression was contradicted by his voice, which was soft and almost deferential. He was not a good public speaker. He was a shy, but friendly man, and many people noted approvingly that he was a real "hijodelpueblo" (child of the people) -- not an elitist, not a theorizing student, but a peasant who had risen to a position of leadership, unashamedly leaving his rough edges intact.

The same week Alvarez and Chacon were killed, U.S. Ambassador White was in Washington

pressuring administration officials to back negotiations between the Salvadoran government and the popular opposition -- a proposal some call the "Zimbabwe option," a reference to the successful British handling of the Rhodesian civil war. That stance represented something of a turnaround for White, who last summer had denounced the Salvadoran opposition as a "Pol Pot left," in reference to the bloody terrorism of the late Cambodian ruler. "Their problem," said White in an interview, "is that the left has no leadership."

The latest effort to wipe out the opposition leadership comes at an

especially critical time for U.S. policy in Latin America. Many observers fear that the killings were intended to provoke a widespread popular uprising in El Salvador that can seem to justify a full-scale military and para-military response, unfettered by President Carter's previous human rights constraints.

In either case, there appears to be no shortage of people in the opposition willing and able to put themselves on the front line in positions of leadership. Within three days of the latest assassinations, successors were named to all six slain leaders.

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