

# El Salvador

<b>Response to Information Request Number:</b>	SLV01003.ZSF
<b>Date:</b>	February 08, 2001
<b>Subject:</b>	El Salvador: Information on the Role of the Civil Defense During the War
<b>From:</b>	INS Resource Information Center
<b>Keywords:</b>	El Salvador / Torture / Extrajudicial executions / Massacres / Death squads / Security forces / Armed forces

## Query:

What was the Civil Defense, how did it operate and what was its record with regard to human rights violations?

## Response:

The nationwide Civil Defense network had its origins in 1) the patrullas cantonales, canton patrols, established in the early 1900s and consisting of army reserve units and local peasants carrying out police-type patrols, and 2) ORDEN, Organización Democrática Nacionalista, Nationalist Democratic Organization, a national paramilitary network and rural vigilante force with tens of thousands of members established by the military in the late 1960s.

The patrullas cantonales, sometimes referred to by the more formal servicio territorial, territorial service, were closely linked in rural areas with the National Guard, the traditional enforcer and protector of the interests of large landholders, and were involved along with the Guard in the 1932 massacre of an estimated 30,000 people that ended a communist-led peasant revolt (Human Rights Watch 1991, 2-3; Washington Post April 1982; Bosch 1999, 24-25).

ORDEN was set up between 1967 and 1969 by Col. José Alberto ("Chele") Medrano, the head of the National Guard at the time who also was responsible for organizing the Agencia Nacional de Seguridad Salvadoreña, ANESAL, the national intelligence agency. ORDEN was built, in part, from the patrullas cantonales. Under Medrano, the patrol structure was further developed and expanded into a well organized militia force, with military officers in command at the departmental level, non-commissioned officers coordinating actions from municipal centers, and many members drawn from army reservists and retired National Guard and Treasury Police officers (Popkin 2000, 42; Binford 1996, 45-46, 218).

ORDEN penetrated every hamlet in the country and, according to Human Rights Watch, "is widely recognized as one of the precursors of the 'death squads' of the late 1970s and 1980s." A principal function of ORDEN was to identify and eliminate purported communists among the rural peasant population. ORDEN units channeled information to ANESAL as well as to the National Guard and the Treasury Police, institutions notorious for the systematic violation of human rights, and carried out repressive activities—including torture and assassination—either alone or in operations with the military and security forces. By 1977-1979, ORDEN was a force estimated at between 50,000 and 100,000, although the real military core of the organization was probably around 10,000 (Binford 1996, 45-46;

Human Rights Watch 1991, 5, 83; Armstrong and Shenk 1982, 101; Popkin 2000, 42; Bonner 1984, 60; Montgomery 1995, 56, 76; Dunkerly 1982, 76).

In late 1979, a short-lived, reformist ruling junta nominally abolished ORDEN. But an ORDEN spokesman said the organization would continue to operate and by 1980 the military had simply incorporated much of ORDEN's patrol and intelligence network into the newly named Defensa Civil, Civil Defense. As analyst Margaret Popkin has written, ORDEN "was dissolved only on paper. No steps were taken to dismantle ORDEN's network or to disarm its members. Instead, the intelligence network and paramilitary control of the countryside continued, often under the guise of civil defense." According to Human Rights Watch, ORDEN, reconstituted as the Civil Defense, "continued to operate with impunity, in complicity with the security forces" (Binford 1996, 218; Bonner 1984, 61; Washington Post April 1982; Stanley 1996, 167; Baloyra 1982, 109; Human Rights Watch 1991, 8, 48; Williams and Walter 1997, 111; Popkin 2000, 43).

Some Civil Defense units even continued to refer to themselves as ORDEN, as was the case when such units participated in the Sumpul River massacre at the border with Honduras in May 1980, and when civil defense patrols identified themselves as ORDEN to a reporter a year later in the north-central department of Cabañas (Human Rights Watch 1991, 48; Washington Post April 1981).

The Civil Defense, under military command and usually armed with rifles, handguns and machetes, was responsible for serious and substantial human rights violations in the 1980s, particularly during the early years of the decade, as reported in the media, by human rights organizations and in the El Rescate database. In 1980-1981, for example, Civil Defense patrols were deeply involved, along with the National Guard, in attacks on peasant cooperatives and other components of a new land reform program, operations which included the mass abduction and murder of men, women and children, the razing of villages and the destruction of crops in a number of departments, particularly in Morazán, Cuscatlán, Chalatenango and San Salvador departments. A representative from the AFL-CIO, after monitoring attacks by patrols against peasant unions in 1980, observed, "In all cases the canton patrols and ORDEN are the same" (Baloyra 1982, 139; Stanley 1996, 195; Washington Post April 1982; Bonner 1984, 202; Associated Press June 1982).

In July 1983, Amnesty International "concluded that a large proportion of the reported killings of non-combatant civilians in El Salvador since 1979 were extrajudicial executions carried out by the regular military and security forces (acting both in uniform and in plain clothes in the guise of the so-called 'death squads'), and by civil defense personnel acting under military command. Amnesty International believes that these extrajudicial executions have occurred on an enormous scale, and that only their precise number remains open to question." Amnesty International also stated that some Salvadoran individuals publicly identified as "death squad" personnel held credentials as members of the civil defense system (Amnesty International 1983, 8; Amnesty International 1988, 45).

The Washington Post reported in 1982 that the three Salvadoran security forces—the Treasury Police, National Police and National Guard—worked closely with the Civil Defense, and that Civil Defense units "keep an eye on potential or imagined troublemakers and in many areas they simply eliminate them." Roberto D'Aubuisson, founder of the most notorious of the Salvadoran death squads in the early 1980s, publicly referred to Civil Defense members as "anonymous heroes" (Washington Post April 1982; Washington Post June 1982).

Civil Defense units were directly involved in a number of massacres during the early 1980s, including the 1980 Sumpul River massacre (as noted above) and the killings of seventy Indian peasants at Las Hojas in the southwestern department of Sonsonate in February 1983. At least two massacres were carried out by Civil Defense patrols in northern Morazán department, in January 1980 and in November 1982 (Human Rights Watch 1991, 49-50; Associated Press July 1983; Associated Press April 1987; Binford 1996, 102).

In another set of killings, in spring 1982, Civil Defense units were responsible for the assassinations of dozens of civilians, including the murder of four mayors and eight other members of the centrist Christian Democratic Party, which Salvadoran right-wingers habitually referred to as "communist" (Associated Press June 1982).

Journalist Shirley Christian wrote in mid-1983 that among Civil Defense units, attitudes toward human rights "are, at best, on a par with those of the National Guard and the Treasury Police" and that Civil Defense units "bear a large part of the responsibility in mass killings." By late 1983, according to analyst Leigh Binford, due to the repressive methods of the military, security forces and the Civil Defense, "much of the countryside had been transformed into a virtual free-fire zone" (Atlantic Monthly 1983; Binford 1996, 149).

As the war progressed the FMLN guerrillas increasingly targeted the Civil Defense and often inflicted heavy losses on smaller, more isolated and under-equipped Civil Defense units. Following major attacks in 1982-1984, some Civil Defense militias were never reformed as villagers believed, with good reason, that the existence of such units made their towns guerrilla targets (New York Times August 1984; Los Angeles Times January 1985; Newsweek August 1984; Byrne 1996, 133-134).

During 1983-1986 the "low-intensity conflict" strategy designed by the United States called for the setting up of new, better-trained Civil Defense units to defend areas repopulated by peasants after guerrillas had been cleared and then provided with economic aid. Such "hearts and minds" counterinsurgency programs were set up first in the central-eastern departments of San Vicente and Usulután and then attempted in eight other departments. By 1987, it was evident that these programs had largely failed, that the guerrillas could not be kept away and that a majority of people remained too afraid or distrustful of the government to participate in Civil Defense units. According to one assessment, in the highly conflictive departments of Morazán, Chalatenango and La Unión, the numbers of Civil Defense militias had been reduced substantially by late 1987 (Byrne 1996, 130-131, 147-148; Los Angeles Times January 1985; Binford 1996, 151; Inter-Press Service April 1985).

According to low-intensity strategy advocates, the role of the Civil Defense was to protect the population, to isolate the FMLN guerrillas from the people. (Manwaring 1988, 338; Byrne 1996, 130) However, as indicated by the El Rescate database, although abuses against civilians by the Civil Defense declined somewhat beginning in the mid-1980s, serious and substantial violations continued until the end of the decade.

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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