

El Salvador

Response to Information Request Number:	SLV01001.ZAR
Date:	16 October 2000
Subject:	El Salvador: The Role of ORDEN in the El Salvadoran Civil War
From:	INS Resource Information Center, Washington, DC
Keywords:	El Salvador, Paramilitary forces, Torture, Extrajudicial execution

Query:

What was ORDEN and what role did it play during the El Salvadoran civil conflict during the late 1970s and early 1980s? Were machetes part of the weaponry used by ORDEN members?

Response:

The Democratic Nationalist Organization (ORDEN) was the 80,000-strong paramilitary network and rural vigilante force established in the late 1960s by the military under Col. José Alberto ("Chele") Medrano. ORDEN was built, in part, from the *patrullas cantonales*, canton patrols, established in the early 1900s and consisting of army reserve units and commandeered local peasants carrying out police patrols. The patrol structure was retained, but under Medrano ORDEN was further developed and expanded into a highly organized militia force, with military officers in command at the department level, non-commissioned officers coordinating actions from municipal centers, and many members drawn from army reservists and retired National Guard and Treasury Police officers. According to Maggie Popkin, former deputy director of the Human Rights Institute of the Central American University, one of ORDEN's principal functions was to identify and eliminate purported communists among the rural population (Armstrong & Shenk 1982, 77, 101; Bonner 1984, 60; Library of Congress 1990, 229, Americas Watch 1991, 5, 83; Stanley 1996, 121; Binford 1996, 45-46; Popkin 2000, 42).

ORDEN penetrated every hamlet in the country and, according to Americas Watch, "is widely recognized as one of the precursors of the 'death squads' of the late 1970s and 1980s." During the 1970s ORDEN units frequently participated with the military and security forces in killings of unarmed government opponents, and was accused of repression by both the U.S. State Department and the Organization of American States (OAS) (AP 1979; Americas Watch March 1982, 40-41, 71-72; Library of Congress 1990, 229, 234; Americas Watch 1991, 5, 83; Binford 1996, 94).

Specific information on ORDEN activities in Jucuarán, Usulután in 1978-1980 is not available to the INS Resource Information Center. However, in early 1979, during the brutal regime of Gen. Carlos Humberto Romero (who ruled from Feb. 1977 until Oct. 1979 and relied heavily on ORDEN to repress opposition in rural areas), the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the OAS issued a report which indicated that ORDEN was terrorizing peasants throughout the country as part of the military's overall policy of repression, and that ORDEN was involved in a number of extrajudicial killings and acts of torture. Moreover, a March 1980 report by Amnesty International to the Inter-American Commission contained seven pages of incidents in which the military, security forces or ORDEN were responsible for killing unarmed civilians (Riding 1979; DeYoung 1979; Bonner 1984, 172).

There were reports in the late 1970s of ORDEN and National Guard forces killing civilian opponents of the government with machetes, sometimes brutally hacking them to death and leaving them out in the open as a warning to other activists. There were also reports that during the fraudulent election that brought Romero to power in Feb. 1977 ORDEN members were using machetes to terrorize people into voting for the general (Armstrong & Shenk 1982, 163; Americas Watch March 1982, 71-72; Bonner 1984, 59, 84, 93).

ORDEN was nominally disbanded in late 1979 but its structure was not dismantled. In fact, when the guerrilla war escalated in 1980-1981, the military folded most of the ORDEN structure, including the patrol network, into a newly named Civil Defense. According to Americas Watch, ORDEN in this way continued to operate with impunity in complicity with the Salvadoran security forces (National Guard, National Police, Treasury Police). Some Civil Defense units even continued to refer to themselves as ORDEN, as was apparently the case when such units participated in the Sumpul River massacre at the border with Honduras in May 1980 (Bonner 1984, 61; Library of Congress 1990, 34, 37, 89, 229; Americas Watch 1991, 8, 48; FBIS April 1993, 59).

The Civil Defense, as noted above, was not formally established until 1980-81. References to earlier, similar groups such as "civil patrol" or "canton patrol" which existed prior to 1980 were often used interchangeably with Civil Defense. But from the founding of ORDEN in the late 1960s through the emergence of the Civil Defense in the early 1980s, ORDEN was in control of all rural patrolling, no matter what the units were called, formally or informally. In 1980, for example, ORDEN was deeply involved in attacks on land reform projects. Richard V. Oulahan, director of the AFL-CIO office in El Salvador, after monitoring the attacks by canton patrols against peasant unions involved in the program, wrote in a formal AFL-CIO memorandum, "In all cases the Canton Patrols and ORDEN are the same!" (Baloyra 1982, 139; Bonner 1984, 202).

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Last Modified 06/14/2002