

El Salvador

Response to Information Request Number:	SLV01008.ZAR
Date:	September 19, 2001
Subject:	El Salvador: Information on the Role of Detectives in the National Police during the Civil War
From:	INS Resource Information Center
Keywords:	Arbitrary detention / Disappearances / Extrajudicial execution / Police / Police investigation / Surveillance / Torture

Query:

What was the role of detectives in the National Police during the civil war, and what is the probability that they would have been involved in human rights violations?

Response:

The National Police, the Treasury Police and the National Guard were the three principal internal security forces in El Salvador prior to their being dismantled and replaced by the National Civilian Police under the UN-sponsored peace accord of January 1992.

In 1945 the various urban police agencies in El Salvador were reorganized into a single entity, the National Police which, like the other two security forces, came under the direct command of the Salvadoran military through the Ministry of Defense. By the 1970s the National Police combined both police and military functions (Jane's Intelligence Review 1 January 1993; AI March 1982, p. 5).

During the early 1980s, the National Police director was the hard-line army officer, Col. Carlos Reynaldo López Nuila, who in 1983 publicly declared that the policy of abductions by security forces was a necessary counterinsurgency tactic (AW 1991, p. 7, 24).

According to Socorro Jurídico Cristiano, El Salvador's leading human rights group in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and Amnesty International, the Salvadoran military and the three security forces were directly responsible for gross human rights violations during the first years of the civil war, killing 42,171 people during the six peak years of violence from 1978 through 1983 (Stanley 1996, p. 3).

Professor William Stanley of the University of New Mexico, an authority on state violence in El Salvador, has described the killings between 1978 and 1983 as a "strategy of mass murder" designed to terrorize the civilian population as well as opponents of the government (Stanley 1996, p. 225). General Adolfo Blandón, the Salvadoran armed forces chief of staff during much of the 1980s, has stated, "Before 1983, we never took prisoners of war" (Danner 1994, p. 42).

Beginning in 1984, due to international pressure and changes instituted under the elected government of President José Napoleon Duarte, there was a decline in civilian killings and abductions by the security forces according to Amnesty International, Americas Watch and the United Nations (AI 1985, p. 143; Inter Press Service November 1984; Inter Press Service January 1985). Still, the National Police and the other two security forces continued to practice forced disappearances, illegal detentions and torture (Stanley 1996,

p. 230-231; AI 1986 p. 152-153).

The duties of National Police detectives included working on common criminal cases. However, a principle role of National Police detectives, usually in plainclothes or otherwise undercover, was to monitor, film and record peaceful political activities, particularly in urban areas, to provide a basis for abductions and interrogations of suspected leftists. This would mean a strong likelihood of involvement in rights abuses (United Press International May 1984; United Press International August 1984).

The degree of involvement in rights violations would have been greatest during the early years of the war. Professor Stanley believes that there is a very high probability that prior to 1984 any member of the National Police would have been involved in the committing of serious rights abuses, and that after 1984 involvement also would have been likely, but less so (Stanley 2000).

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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