

El Salvador

Response to Information Request Number:	SLV01005.ZAR
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Subject:	El Salvador: Information on the Mariona Prison, Formally Named La Esperanza, in San Salvador
From:	INS Resource Information Center
Keywords:	El Salvador / Political prisoners / Prisons / Torture

Query:

What was the Mariona Prison - formally named La Esperanza and located in San Salvador - and to what extent were human rights violations, particularly torture, committed inside this facility?

Response:

The prison officially named La Esperanza ("Hope") was the principal men's prison in El Salvador. It was, and still is, located on a small hill on the northern outskirts of the capital of San Salvador in the San Luis Mariona section of the sprawling, lower-class Mejicanos neighborhood. The facility, built to house 800 prisoners, has always been commonly known as "Mariona." As was the case in most official prisons (as distinct from clandestine detention centers run by the security forces and the military), until late 1987 prisoners incarcerated at Mariona for political reasons were kept in a separate wing, although the government did not specifically refer to them as political prisoners. As of the start of 1983, there were 1,090 inmates, 652 of whom were political prisoners. After 1987, inmates held for political reasons were dispersed among the general prison population (New York Times 18 Jan 1983; Christian Science Monitor 15 Oct 1985; San Francisco Chronicle 8 Mar 1992; Popkin 2000, p.41; Associated Press 15 Feb 1983).

Torture of political prisoners at Mariona was common in the early 1980s, according to Amnesty International, Salvadoran rights monitors and press reports. Forms of torture included the capucha - a rubber or plastic hood used to induce asphyxiation - and severe beatings. In one case, prisoners reported that guards set off gases in a cell block that spread some type of dust that led to the coughing up of blood after being inhaled (Science Monitor, 3 Oct 1983; AI 1983; United Press International 19 Mar 1982).

In the early 1980s torture generally was prelude to being executed and, in that sense, people arrested for political reasons who found themselves in Mariona were among a distinct minority, given that the military and security forces were killing perceived leftists or leftist sympathizers by the thousands annually. Beginning in 1984, political killings began to decline, but arrests for political reasons did not. Torture continued as well, but at a somewhat lesser rate and in a more sophisticated and less visible form, to lessen international criticism about rights violations (Binford 1996, p.156-162; AW 1991, p.18).

Apparently related to the effort to make the use of torture less obvious, by 1985 reports of torture taking place inside Mariona had declined. Instead, according to a study researched and written inside Mariona by five incarcerated members of the non-governmental Human Rights Committee of El Salvador (CDHES), most Mariona prisoners did experience torture in a systematic way—but at the hands of the security forces and the military prior to being placed in Mariona (Binford 1996, p.158-160; Human Rights Committee of El Salvador 1986; Christian Science Monitor 27 Oct 1987; Los Angeles Times 19 Oct 1985; Washington Post 25 Feb 1986).

Also by 1985, following a series of hunger strikes, political prisoners at Mariona had gained a number of privileges. For example, they could keep their cells open until evening lock-up and family members could bring them food on visiting days. Also, the political prisoner wing was now managed in part by an inmate organization, the Committee of Political Prisoners of El Salvador (Christian Science Monitor 15 Oct 1985; Washington Post 25 Feb 1986; Los Angeles Times 19 Oct 1985).

At the same time, the Mariona inmate population continued to increase, making for highly overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. At one point in the second half of the 1980s, according to one count, there were as many as 1,200 political prisoners in an overall population of about 2,600 in quarters originally built for 800 (New York Times 8 Mar 1992; Popkin 2000, p.41).

Although torture inside Mariona declined, incidents of abuse at the prison continued to be reported. For example, Amnesty International reported that in April 1985, guards allegedly beat a group of prisoners at Mariona with their rifles. On a number of occasions in 1985, Amnesty International expressed concern about continuing ill-treatment of prisoners generally after incommunicado detentions had ended (AI 1986, p. 155).

Amnesty International also expressed concern about an attack by unidentified gunmen against political prisoners in Mariona in 1987, with three prisoners being wounded. Prison authorities said the attack was carried out by armed leftists but Salvadoran rights groups said the attack appeared to be conducted by members of the security forces colluding with prison guards. In a separate incident in 1987, Amnesty reported the death of a prisoner at Mariona following a severe beating, but noted that the beating had been carried out by security forces prior to the prisoner's arrival at Mariona (AI 1988, p.112-113).

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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