

# For Battered Little El Salvador, U.S. Aid Is No Helping Ha

By LUCY KOMISAR

Think of a small underdeveloped country. The masses are poor and are exploited by a wealthy oligarchy which controls the economy and is kept in power by the army, which has been for years aided by American military and economic support. Even moderates seeking small reforms are repressed. But in spite of torture and killing, workers and peasants, joined by students, clergy and much of the new middle class, have organized against the government and are carrying on a guerrilla war. The United States, perceived by many people as a champion of justice and democracy, seems not to notice the nature of the struggle.

Does that story line sound familiar? It used to be a rather standard one until President Carter announced his human-rights policy. Many Americans were glad that the country appeared to be moving in another direction. And most foreigners believed that the United States had gained new stature and prestige as a result of its new policy. In a growing number of countries, the repressed were inspired to fight back, counting on the United States to speak out on their behalf in the name of human rights.

Certainly, that is now the case in El Salvador, a Central American republic slightly larger than New Jersey with a population of 5 million people. Dominated by a handful of wealthy families—2% of the people control approximately 60% of the land—more than half the population is illiterate and almost half the working-age population is unemployed or underemployed. Since the 1950s the United States has provided millions in "security" aid to help the military keep order within a population grown restless with hunger and desperate under severe government repression.

In 1972, the army denied an election victory to the moderate Christian Democrats who wanted national development and reform under capitalism. The United States continued to support the illegitimate government despite growing popular resistance. Throughout the 1970s, right-wing paramilitary groups linked to the government and financed by the plantation and business oligarchy terrorized worker and peasant organizations, decimated the Christian Democratic movement and murdered socially active clergy.

President Carter, having announced his human-rights policy, pressed the government for improvements. But the changes were insignificant.

Then with the fall of strongman Anastasio Somoza Debayle in Nicaragua, the United States became more worried about left-wing opposition in Central America. Thus, last October the Administration welcomed a coup



Drawing by Barbara Cummings

moderates resigned, unable to get the military to recognize their authority or to curb the violent confrontations and killings.

During the first two and a half months of the junta's administration more than 800 people died—a rate higher than that during the previous administration under ousted Gen. Carlos Humberto Romero.

A second junta took office, comprised of those military officers who were members of the first junta, and new civilian members. They received U.S. support which prevented a counter-coup by the far right. The Carter Administration hoped it could promote change and at first it appeared that change was in store. The junta announced the nationalization of banks, a new labor code and agrarian reform. But those hopes were chimeras. Again the junta could not control the military or the conservatives, who financed widespread terrorism by right-wing paramilitary forces and thus held a veto policy as effective as if they held offices in the National Palace. In March civilian junta members again resigned, protesting the rampant violence. Others were found to take their place.

Shortly after his plea Romero was assassinated. And \$5.7 million in U.S. military aid and \$72 million in economic aid was released for El Salvador.

Even today, as many of its allies criticize the junta and limit their support of it—Mexico, for instance, has withdrawn its ambassador and has reduced relations to the consular level—Washington continues to portray the El Salvador government as a moderate one caught in a crossfire between comparable evils—right and left-wing extremists. In a March statement, still distributed as American policy, the State Department declared that, "Implementation of the reform has gone remarkably well," though it noted serious problems: "Extremists of both left and right are attempting to bring down the government." And it went on to say that to proceed with reforms, the government had had to institute "a limited state of seige, suspending temporarily certain constitutional guarantees."

That is a rather extraordinary way to describe the reality of more than 6,000 people killed since last October, most of them by the military and right-wing death squads. At this writing it is estimated that at least 30 people are killed each day. Or to explain the gruesome

Even the agrarian reform mo for repression. In one case, gov a plantation and told the peasa own leaders. The next morning shot everyone who had been ch

Now the representative of p Democratic Revolutionary Fro Social Democrats, dissident C Marxists groups supported by and professionals. Its president va, is a former minister of agric wealthy coffee-grower family.

According to Alvarez, who w July to meet with members of press, the FDR seeks a plural ment and a mixed economy tha sectors such as utilities, bank health; distribute land to the pe dium-sized private businesses vices. It would be nonaligned in

The FDR has received suppo Belgium, West Germany and States continues to supply the and political backing. A congre mittee will shortly consider assistance to be used for tr forces and for helicopters, pa and other material.

Last February, Sen. Edwar member of the Foreign Rela President Carter that the co "not susceptible to a military command the broad support of He noted that, "Regrettably, do down this path before, too off that military aid or other activi ular regimes are like pouring g fire."

Alvarez says the opposition v ed States be neutral. And he e intervention. Perhaps that is t Zorinsky when he tells Carter military aid or covert action pro

Once again the United Sta and repressive government be fact that there are leftists on FDR follows the program Alva be no threat to the United Sta conflict in that strife-torn cour rious threats to hemispheric pe

Aid to El Salvador should be of the present regime should