

Earthquake reveals social, economic faults in El Salvador

By Teresa A. Parsons

An earthquake that caused heavy damage in El Salvador's capital city earlier this month also struck a blow against prospects for peace in that country, according to a Catholic Relief Services official.

Peter Shiras, Catholic Relief Services' deputy director for Latin America and the Caribbean, believes that the earthquake could intensify the current social and political polarization in El Salvador.

"The earthquake has revealed the geothermal fault over which the city is built, but it has also revealed the social and economic faults that exist in the country," he said, quoting a Salvadoran with whom he spoke last week.

Shiras stopped in Rochester on October 21, shortly after returning from San Salvador, where he surveyed the damage during a two-day tour. He spoke about the roots of poverty and racism in Central America on Tuesday evening at St. Mary's Church in downtown Rochester.

The earthquake struck just before noon on Friday, October 10, with aftershocks continuing throughout the night and into the following day.

Most of the damage was concentrated in the capital city, where hundreds of people were buried under tons of rubble. To date, Shiras said, nearly 1,000 Salvadorans are believed dead, with 3,000 to 4,000 wounded and as many as 280,000 left homeless.

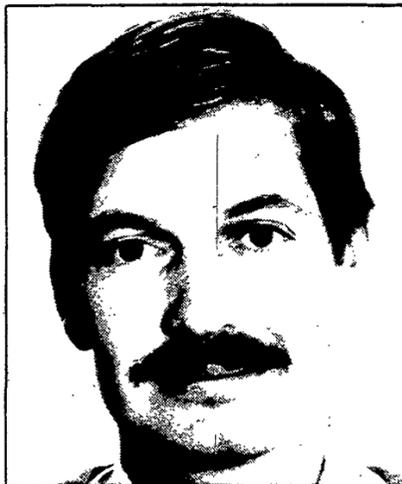
Hardest hit are the poor, who were already living on the edge of survival in the city's shanty towns and slums. Approximately 5,000 of the homeless are known as the "twice displaced," because they only recently fled to the city from their homes in the countryside in order to escape the fighting between rebels and government forces.

Many were squatters, living on land to which they have no official claim.

"Most people had at least something over their heads before," Shiras said. "But you can't reconstruct on somebody else's land."

Meanwhile, despite the earthquake, the country's seven-year-old civil war rumbled on, with bombings reported in the North.

So far, Shiras said, it is not clear who will pay to rebuild the homes of the poor. But rebuilding will undoubtedly raise the cost of housing. Those who can no longer afford to pay rent will have no choice but to join the ranks of the squatters.



Susan Kost

Catholic Relief Services' official Peter Shiras visited El Salvador just after the earthquake.

Church leaders are concerned that such reconstruction issues be addressed by the government, Shiras said that during a recent homily, Salvadoran Archbishop Rivera y Damas warned that the government would face a social cataclysm worse than the earthquake unless it developed policies on property rights. The prelate claimed that one-third of all the houses of the city's poor were destroyed by the earthquake.

But Shiras added that the government's overall response to the earthquake has been "very slow."

Government soldiers are overseeing clean-up operations, while Salvadoran President Jose Napoleon Duarte has put the private sector in charge of receiving donations.

Neither group has shown much sympathy for the poor in the past, according to Shiras. Some see the army's involvement as part of a continuing campaign to rehabilitate its image.

"Their efforts seem to be directed at controlling the population rather than benefitting the people," he said. "People complained to me that they had not received any help from the government."

To date, CRS has committed \$180,000 to purchasing relief supplies, including plastic sheeting and tarpaulins to provide temporary shelter, Shiras noted. The organization has also



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Those who dwell in the slums and shantytowns of San Salvador were disproportionately affected by the October 10 earthquake. Salvadoran Archbishop Rivera y Damas estimated that one-third of the nearly 280,000 people left homeless were poor.

distributed a one-month food supply to 125,000 city residents, many of whom are unable to work because they have lost their homes.

Efforts at providing shelter are especially urgent because the country is approaching its coldest season of the year — November through January.

Although he was not optimistic about the country's immediate prospects for recovery, Shiras did offer one hopeful observation. Relief efforts are reaching the urban poor, whom agencies have consistently neglected in favor

of their rural counterparts.

"The reconstruction process is an opportunity to create something better than these people have had before," he said.

But Shiras also recalled that many people have attributed the fall of Nicaraguan president Anastasio Somoza to the way he responded to a 1972 earthquake in Managua.

"There is a heightened awareness of social and economic repression," he said. "I can very easily see the same thing happening in the aftermath of the Salvadoran earthquake."

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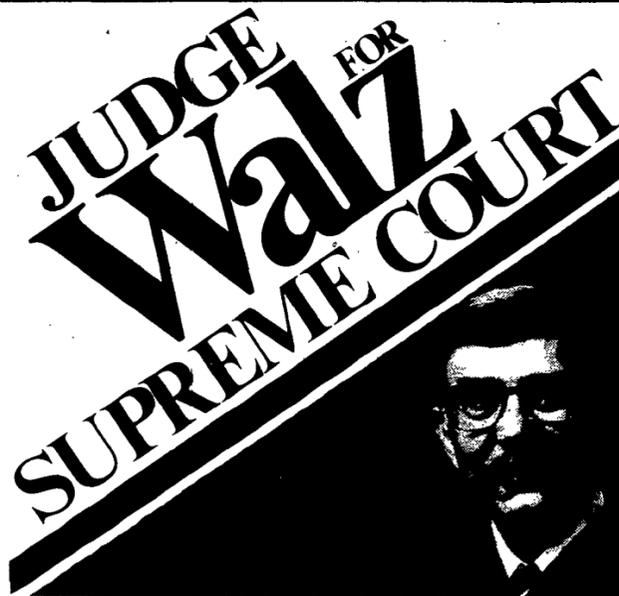
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