

Campeños' cries call sister to second Salvadoran voyage

By Teresa A. Parsons

When Sister Kathleen Weider, SSJ, traveled to El Salvador last November, she encountered few people who supported either the government or the rebel forces in the Salvadoran civil war, which has lasted nearly eight years.

Most of the people she met were *campesinos* (farmworkers), who had fled from their homes and small villages in fear of both sides. What those people wanted was peace, Sister Weider observed.

Since she returned from her trip — more than half a year ago — she has been unable to forget the pleas of Salvadoran campesinos. "Be our voice," they begged. "If the United States would only stop sending aid, the war in El Salvador would end tomorrow."

For that reason, Sister Weider, an assistant chaplain at Nazareth College in Rochester, has accepted an invitation to return to Central America this month as part of a U.S. delegation seeking support for displaced Salvadorans who want to return to their homes.

"For me, it comes down to believing that if there is any contribution I can make to alleviating the suffering of these people, or any step I can take to bring us closer to peace, I would be willing to do that," Sister Weider said.

Since 1980, hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans have been driven from towns and villages by the civil war and the government's depopulation campaigns. Depopulation is aimed at eliminating from the countryside any means of sustenance for guerrilla forces.

Some campesinos became refugees within their own country, settling in inner-city camps and slums. An estimated 22,000 Salvadorans have taken refuge in Honduras alone since 1980.

Nearly 12,000 refugees live in the largest of four Honduran camps, Mesa Grande. Conditions there remain prisonlike, despite the refugees' attempts to organize the camp with support from international relief agencies. Life in the camp offers little opportunity for such constructive activities as cultivating crops. Parents complain that their children are growing up on charity, without ever having experienced freedom.

At the same time, the refugees' contact with the outside world is largely controlled by their Honduran hosts. The refugees are said to be subject to forced relocations, periodic searches and seizures of their belongings, as well as harassment and threats.

According to information from some human-rights organizations, the Honduran government is attempting to increase its control over the refugees. Military forces are reportedly limiting access to the camps by representatives of international humanitarian organizations. This past June, for example, the United Nations High Commission on Refugees agreed to cede to the Honduran government its jurisdiction over health and education programs in the refugee camps.

Last March, a group of 328 families from Mesa Grande purchased a newspaper advertisement announcing their intent to return to El Salvador this fall and reoccupy their homes in the towns of Santa Marta and Las Vueltas. They will thus become the first large group of refugees from outside the country to voluntarily return to their homes as intact communities.

In preparation for the refugees' journey in October, the U.S. delegation with which Sister Weider plans to travel will visit Mesa



On Sister Kathleen Weider's first visit to El Salvador last November, she visited the Parish of Mary, Mother of the Poor. Located on the outskirts of San Salvador, the parish claims more than 20,000 residents. More than half have been displaced by the civil war in El Salvador.

Grande as well as the Salvadoran capitol of San Salvador. The delegation was organized by "Going Home," a Washington, D.C.-based interfaith campaign that supports Salvadoran refugees in their efforts to repopulate their homelands.

In addition to Sister Weider, delegation members are: Father Frank Moan, SJ, director of the Jesuit Refugee Service, USA; Glenn Stein, director of congregational relations for the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism; and Jose Escobar, executive director of the Interfaith Office on Human Rights in El Salvador.

On Tuesday, August 25, the U.S. delegates will leave for Mesa Grande, where they plan to spend several days talking with refugees and meeting with officials from Catholic Relief Services and the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, in an effort to enlist support for the repatriation effort. On August 31,

the delegates will travel to San Salvador, where they will discuss similar concerns with representatives of religious and secular human-rights and relief organizations.

Although the repopulation of at least four Salvadoran villages has succeeded, each attempt has encountered opposition. Members of the Salvadoran military have allegedly captured, interrogated and threatened residents, and are said to have limited deliveries of food and medicine to the four communities.

Government officials fear that the presence of farmers in the countryside will provide support — either willing or unwilling — for guerrilla forces, Sister Weider explained. "The (Salvadoran) government is still committed to depopulation," she said. "When people are in government-run camps, it makes them much easier to control."

When Sister Weider returns to Rochester in early-September, she hopes to enlist support for the displaced campesinos by informing local residents of the Salvadorans' pending return from Honduras. "I see the efforts of the Salvadorans at Mesa Grande as a huge step and a very risky step toward peace," she said. "To a large extent, their safety depends on how aware people are around the world of their efforts."

Meanwhile, a consensus has been building among large groups of Salvadoran refugees. They have come to believe that the most effective contribution they can make toward ending the civil war is to demand the right to return to their homes and plant crops.

Since early 1986, some 286 families who were displaced within El Salvador have succeeded in well-publicized repopulations of four villages — Tenancingo, San Jose de las Flores, El Barillo and Panchimilama.

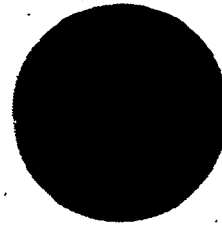
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