

Features

Local activist gets taste of Salvadoran conflict

By Lee Strong

A quick scan of recent U.S. newspapers would suggest that little, if any, political upheaval is going on in El Salvador, and that Salvadorans are enjoying a period of peace and stability.

Yet nothing could be further from the truth, according to John E. Till Jr. of Mother of Sorrows Parish in Greece.

On July 21, Till, as part of a 40-member U.S. delegation to the Central American nation, participated in a non-violent march of workers and supporters in the nation's capitol of San Salvador. Estimates of the size of the march range from 5,000 to 25,000 protesters, but all accounts say the protest was the largest anti-government demonstration this year. The march was intended to protest a national emergency law being considered by the National Assembly and to demand the release of an imprisoned labor leader.

The marchers were proceeding peacefully from the cathedral to the national assembly building, Till said, when they were halted by treasury police and security forces. The police opened fire — either at the marchers or over their heads, according to various witnesses — and shot tear gas into the crowd. Several people were injured, including a woman from the United States.

"It was kind of an alarming experience because I could see tear gas pellets coming at me," Till said. "It was a peaceful march; that attack was completely unprovoked."

The U.S. delegation — consisting mainly of students and teachers — visited El Salvador July 20 to August 2 to participate in an annual march commemorating the deaths of 30 university students killed in San Salvador on July 30, 1975. Delegations from a number of other nations — including Canada, Germany, Austria and Switzerland — were also in the country to participate in the march, which was co-sponsored by the National Unity of Salvadoran Workers (UNTS) and the General Association of Salvadoran University Students.

According to Till, who is the convener of the Rochester Committee on Latin America, the



Campesino children assemble outside San Salvador's Cathedral before attempting to march to their country's National Assembly.

U.S. delegates also made the trip to show support for the Salvadoran people, to deliver \$15,000 in medical supplies and to see firsthand the situation in the country. The July 21 march was the first of many eye-opening experiences, Till noted.

The day after that march, one of its Salvadoran organizers was arrested. Although the delegation members and human rights groups in the United States have tried to find out what

happened to the man, the Salvadoran government has said nothing about him, Till said.

The fate of Rigoberto Orellana, another opposition leader with whom the group was in contact, is known, however. Leader of an organization known as the Movement for Bread, Land, Work and Liberty, Orellana met July 27 with several leaders of the U.S. delegation, including Mike Zielinski of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador in

Washington, D.C. The next day, Orellana was dead.

"The official report was that he died in a car accident," Zielinski said. "But investigators for the non-governmental human rights committee said that he'd been tortured and killed. At the funeral, I saw the body. There were marks of torture on his face, and his throat had been slashed."

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