

Salvadorans in U.S. grieve over fury at home

By Laurie Hansen
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — For Salvadorans living in the United States, news of the violence at home "is hell," said Jesuit Father Michael Kennedy, who works with Salvadorans residing in Los Angeles.

"The stress is incredible. They can't sleep. They're crying. In their hearts, they're not really here. They're more in El Salvador," said the priest, who is director of the Centro Pastoral Rutilio Grande, a pastoral center at Our Lady Queen of Angels Parish in downtown Los Angeles. An estimated 4,000 of the parish's 12,000 members are Salvadorans.

Father Kennedy made the comments in a Nov. 29 telephone interview with Catholic News Service.

The largest concentration of Salvadorans in the United States is in Los Angeles, where an estimated 300,000 have settled. Some 75,000 to 150,000 reside in the Washington metropolitan area.

At Washington's Sacred Heart Catholic Church, where Dominican sisters run an adult-education program, hundreds of newly arrived Salvadorans gather nightly to study English.

"Many of our students are staying home from classes. They're afraid. There's deep concern and fear ... and a desire to find out how their people are doing" in El Salva-

dor, said the program's director, Dominican Sister Vivian Gorman.

One former student, whose brother and sister still study at Sacred Heart, returned to San Salvador in late October. Twenty-two days later, rebels entered his house shooting and killed him, his wife and their child, Sister Gorman reported in a Nov. 30 interview with CNS.

After a recent outbreak of violence in San Salvador, somber-faced students lined up outside Sister Gorman's office after evening classes to write down names and phone numbers of relatives they've been unable to reach. A teacher at the school who works during the day on Capitol Hill had volunteered to try to communicate with their relatives.

Capuchin Father Donald Lippert, associate pastor of Sacred Heart Parish, said Dec. 1 that the violence was "bringing back a lot of bad memories" for his Salvadoran parishioners, many of whom had fled El Salvador in the early 1980s because of bloodshed at that time.

Sacred Heart parishioner Eugenio Medrano, 49, said he and his family in Washington "feel helpless."

"We haven't been able to communicate with my wife's mother. From here what can we do? The only thing we can do is pray. We ask God that there's a resolution to the conflict," he said.

Medrano said the Salvadorans suffering the most are "civilians" who favor neither the government nor the guerrillas. "As long as they suffer there we suffer with them here," he said.

Father Kennedy said he has organized "therapy groups" for Salvadorans in the Los Angeles area, many of whom "haven't heard whether their family members are OK."

One former parishioner, Hector Gonzalez, 21, who had been co-director of the pastoral center, decided a year ago to return to El Salvador to work for the church there.

Our Lady Queen of Angels parishioners heard in mid-November that Gonzalez had been killed in the cross fire. "He was in a

truck. He was fired on from above. The truck was totally destroyed," Father Kennedy said.

Another parishioner, who asked that her name not be used to protect relatives in El Salvador, took her 18-month-old daughter to San Salvador for a month's vacation. She was there visiting her mother, brother and sister when the violence was at its height in mid-November.

It was a vacation she won't forget. "There are sights that keep playing over and over in my mind. I am so worried about my family," the 27-year-old San Salvador native told CNS in a Nov. 29 telephone interview from Los Angeles.

"Two weeks after we arrived the bombing started. There were many moments of terror. We spent three days under a table, very fearful, without food, light or water,"

she said.

"We'd get up to take the children to the bathroom and when we did we saw bodies lying in the streets, bodies that had been destroyed by bullets. There were lots of bugs and animals eating the cadavers. Everything was contaminated," she said.

After three days, Salvadoran soldiers took all residents of the San Jacinto neighborhood of San Salvador where she was staying to evacuate. She and her relatives fled to a nearby school where they sought refuge.

"People would go every day to the morgue to see if family members or relatives were there. There was no list. They just piled up all the dead bodies and you'd have to go through them to see if there was anyone you knew," she said.

Action taken to help free arrested woman

THOMASTON, Conn. (CNS) — Friends of Jennifer Casolo, a Catholic native of Thomaston arrested Nov. 26 by El Salvador military police, are taking actions to bring about her release. Salvadoran police arrested Casolo for allegedly storing a cache of ammunition at her home.

Ann Lutterman, a friend of Casolo, urged people to call or send telegrams to the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador, members of Congress, and the Bush administration, asking Casolo's safety and release, and for a cutoff of aid to El Salvador.

"Jennifer is a delightful person, very devout and religious, highly respected," said Lutterman, who worked alongside Casolo in El Salvador. Casolo has worked for the San Antonio-based Christian Education Seminar since 1985. Lutterman, religious-outreach coordinator for the New Haven, Conn., branch of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, had worked with refugee camps in the Archdiocese of San Salvador in 1987-88.

Lutterman said Casolo, a former member of St. Thomas Parish in Thomaston, is a practicing Catholic who believes in non-violent change.

Lutterman said the charges against Casolo are an attempt by the military to justify their killings and to excuse con-



Jennifer Casolo was arrested by Salvadoran police on Nov. 26.

tinuing violence on churches. "It's time for (U.S.) churches to make their voices heard," Lutterman said. "It's been 10 years since Archbishop (Oscar) Romero was assassinated. We don't want any more martyrs in El Salvador."

An ecumenical prayer service for Casolo was scheduled for Dec. 1 at the Thomaston Congregational Church.

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