Jailed junta critics tell of death, torture

SAN SALVADOR, 19 March — The Santa Tecla jail for political prisoners is a grim place. From the outside all that is visible are the high walls, painted a light blue over chipped plaster.

The entrance to the prison is an armored-plated door with a small peep-hole. The door is eventually swung open after a study of identification papers.

Inside, several prison guards stand armed with rifles of unknown manufacture. Then it is through another armored door and into the office of the prison commander. The prison is dark and odorously musty.

The commandant forbids cameras or tape recorders. He is even surprised that a reporter has been allowed to enter the prison, but on verifying the source of the permission (the Minister, Colonel Guillermo Garcia), he is reasonably helpful with facts and figures.

The prison records show that there are 128 prisoners here. All are political prisoners. They represent various sections of the community, including the media, the trade unions and the schools and universities. I am allowed through to see the prisoners. They live four or six to a cell and are allowed out to a common area during the day. The common area is cramped, the facilities for cooking and the personal hygiene area primitive, but the men here spend a lot of time trying to make their environment as habitable as possible.

Intellectuals

As many of the prisoners here represent the intellectual strata of El Salvadoran society, they are allowed to be fairly self-governing, within the confines of the space allotted to them and the hours they are allowed out of their cells. They make use of this limited freedom to harassed activities, to help each other and to continue to work. In a limited way, in their pre-prison profession. That is, of course, where they have not been outlawed.

The following interview with the three main groups represented in the prison was through a chemical engineer who spoke several languages. He was the owner of a successful small business before being imprisoned.

JOURNALISTS: Francisco Ramirez Alvaro of El Independent newspaper, which has been closed, and Guillermo Diaz Ramos of the International Press Agency, were charged with subversive activity.

Speaking through the interpreter they said: "The principal political crime that we were charged with was that of being middlemen between the media and the guerrillas. We deny that charge." They and three women reporters, including the owner of a newspaper, have yet to be brought before a court.

They said: "We were blindfolded and handcuffed and had guns poked into our chests when answering questions before a military judge. We are not criminals. We have not committed any political crimes. We do not know why we are here."

Questioned further, they said they believed they had been imprisoned because "we were working with the opposition media. We were being honest, we were telling the truth. In El Salvador reporters cannot tell of the authorities killing people."

They said they did not consider telling the truth to be an adequate reason for being imprisoned.

The discussion turned to prison conditions. They said: "We are locked up at 6 p.m. and are made to sleep with the lights on. We are under constant surveillance. The guards abuse us, they beat us and aim their rifles through the bars of the cell doors."

A listener to the conversation went away and returned with a man in his mid-20s. He was a high school teacher before being arrested. He said most of the teachers were now dead. Then he showed what the authorities had done to him.

Across his arms, legs, body and face, large areas of flesh were laid bare where, he said, interrogators had thrown sulphuric acid on him in an attempt to get a confession. He had also been electrically assaulted and had acid poured on his testicles, he said.

Fortunately, one of the prisoners here was a lecturer in medicine at the university and, with the poor facilities available, helped to clean up his gaping wounds.

The journalists said they received electrical shocks and beatings (as does everyone at Santa Tecla from time to time) but most of the torture was psychological.

They said: "We were tied up and left outside and were told we would be shot. They fired blanks." The interpreter then said: "They gave me hallucinogenic drugs for 48 hours. It sent me crazy for a week. You will help me to still be alive in two months if you can publish my name in the Press of other countries."

The journalists said the prisoners received little food or supplies from the Government. "If you are healthy, it is because our families gave us food. The wealthy people help the poor in this jail."

Despite the reasonable well-being of most of the prisoners, many were suffering from ailments caused by the unhealthy conditions and inadequate diet.

"On visiting day the police park their cars outside the prison and they treat our families badly so they get afraid and don't visit. This is to demonize the prisoners," the journalists said.

"The only reason they treat us this way is because we want on a hunger strike and they were concerned that we would all die together."

"They have been more careful over the past two months because of the international Press. The whole world is watching."

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Jailed Salvadoran critics tell of death, torture "behind doors" in El Salvador prison

The names of El Salvadoran martyrs are painted over cell doors. I was told they were put there by the prisoners, but the majority of whom were now dead.

The journalists said that before they were arrested, seven news people had been killed. They mentioned a production manager of the "La Cronica" and a photographer who were found chopped into small pieces after being dragged last July.

The popular opinion in El Salvador is that the people who commit these types of crimes, the "para-military," are soldiers in civilian dress, but the two journalists would not say this. A sentence of death comes from such a statement.

They said that at about the same time that "La Cronica" was closed, the offices of the "Independent" newspaper and the Catholic Church radio station YAS were blown up.

"All opposition newspapers are now closed," they said. Some of the prisoners held here were printers and secretaries at the newspapers before they were closed.

"They had no responsibility for the content of the papers."

The "revolutionary junta" had tried to modify the agrarian sector and the bank nationalized land taxes.

In the agrarian sector the National Democratic Organization, similar to the Free World, has been assassinated by the Nazis, is preferred by about 60 percent of the big and middle farmers. The situation has become critical. They are mostly illiterate and often are ignorant of the injustice here."

The journalists made a final statement on the "workers" of the junta. It is for the benefit of the industrial workers of El Salvador. During the last days of the Salvadoran government, they have managed to continue the military operations of the junta.

UNIONISTS: Most of the unionists in the prison were members of the Sindicato Trabajadores Empleados del Consejo Ejecutivo de la Electricidad. This union represents the workers of the privately owned monopoly of the state-run electricity in El Salvador. Presumably the secretaries of the union as well as union secretaries and other members.

They are in jail for a strike which disrupted electrical supplies in El Salvador for 24 hours. They told me the linesmen had to work with 150,000 volts running through live wires. They were being paid about $165 a week for this very dangerous job. The union held discussions which resulted in 18 unionists being fired from their families or workmates and a further 30 being dismissed.

The strikers declared: "Then the government declared the union unconstitutional."

They also said, under decree 296, that we cannot talk about political subjects in any way, which includes workers' rights and the deaths of workers. This also included newspapers. That is when we went on strike."

The unionists were given the same sort of trial as the journalists, but the disturbing thing about their case is that all documentation about it has been destroyed. But they have no longer officially exist.

In El Salvador, such a situation has very ominous overtones. But, as they "true to the cause of the workers," they hesitate to discuss the politics of El Salvador."

"This government does not represent the people. This government does not exist, according to the constitution of El Salvador," they said.

"Repression is the first quality of this government because this government is not at liberty to resolve the problems of this country in peace. The liberty of forming unions is no longer present. Most of the leaders of these new organizations have been put in jail or disappeared."

UNIONISTS at the present time are either missing or dead. Including the teachers union, of the hundred thousand have disappeared. The teachers suffer a lot from the government. Most of the things that you will find in the streets and the countryside are terrorist actions of the junta."

The unionists went on: "We feel that the government is not interested in the broad majority of the people and their interests. We would like you to send a message to all the workers, unionists and people in your country. We hope you sympathize with us in our situation."

Most of the unionists are not allowed to see their families on visiting day. All managed to smile and give warm handshakes, although it is very likely that they will soon be killed."

"TERRORISTS: Seven professors and some of the workers of the university in San Salvador were the next group I spoke with. They were very suspicious that there might be a government agent and questioned me closely, not allowing me to question them. They included the director of the university, the head of the legal faculty, the head of the economics faculty and the head of the law faculty.

"They said: "The real charge against us is that we belong to the political groups of the university. This is the last action (by the government) in regard to the university as it has now closed.""

"The campaign against the university began with the second military junta, that is, the present one."

There had been systematic persecution, kidnapping and assassination of professors and students of the university. Hundreds of students and professors have been assassinated.

The university had been surrounded by soldiers, who fired on it, killing many people."

"In the last period, it had been denounced against the wall of the auditorium while there were students in it that a bomb was destroyed in a banana attack."

"There was then the last assassination on 26 June last year when the university was totally occupied by the troops. The result was 49 deaths. There had been no resistance to the troops by students or faculty."

All of the equipment in the university had either been blown up or had been sold by the soldiers. A junta commission policed the prosecution of the destruction and theft at about $7,000,000, but it is thought to have been more.

On 26 October last year the previous director of the university and president of the International University Service based in Geneva, Felix Antonio Ulla, was taken absolutely against his will. No charge can be considered against us within the constitution of this country."

"The professors counted that a number of university students were killed because they do not respect the law. They have no respect for any legal or human rights of the people."

"Economically, the country has hit rock bottom. They said: "It is a catastrophic situation and the $500 million (President) Duarte is begging from Reagan would be not enough to alter anything because we don't have anything, any productivity in the country to invest the money into."

They said the Democratic Revolutionary Front is an umbrella group which represented many political views and was the only popular representative of the majority of the people.

The professors asked if they could thank the universities of the world for their support and the international press for interest in the story of the country.

The prisoners of the jail then elected a spokesman who came forward with a request: If the press in other countries could print their names there would be a better chance that they might one day be released.

Large letters on a dormitory wall spelled out: "Liberdor desde la prisión (freedom — we will win)."