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FILE ONLY

Peasants Pray for Justice on Massacre Anniversary

By DAN WILLIAMS, *Times Staff Writer*

SONSONATE, El Salvador—The dark-faced peasants gathered for a solemn anniversary and to pray for justice that they now believe will never come.

They met at the San Antonio church in Sonsonate for a Mass to commemorate the 1983 massacre of Indian farmers, apparently by army troops, at the nearby Las Hojas farm cooperative. A judge officially counted 18 farmers killed, but local residents say many more were slain.

For two years, leaders of an independent organization of Indian farmers, the Salvadoran National Indigenous Assn., have pressed the army, the courts and now the government of President Jose Napoleon Duarte to arrest and try those responsible.

Little has happened. Three non-military informers were arrested, although seven others named in warrants remain free.

The soldiers believed to have done the killing and their commanding officers have not been charged with anything.

The inaction on the part of the Duarte government is most frustrating to the peasants who were among the Salvadoran president's staunchest supporters in his climb to power in last spring's elections. Indigenous Assn. leaders met with him in January but came away with only a promise to investigate.

"The government has no guts," said association leader Adrian Esquino Lizco. "The case is paralyzed. We see no movement."

The feeling that justice has been delayed in the Las Hojas case bolsters a sense in El Salvador that Duarte's government is often frustrated in exercising its power.

The sources of that frustration, in the view of many observers, are the forces that traditionally ruled El Salvador—the political right and the military.

The country's National Assembly has taken the lead in obstructing Duarte's administration. Rightist parties, led by the conservative

Arena party, outnumber Duarte's moderate Christian Democrats and have voted consistently as a block to stymie his programs.

Assembly elections are scheduled March 31. The rightists are expected to maintain—even expand—their majority, owing in part to a new election law tailored by the assembly.

The law permits the two biggest conservative parties, Arena and the National Conciliation Party, to appear separately on the ballot even though they have formed a coalition. Their votes will be combined after the polls close.

The appearance of several parties on the ballot will diminish the Christian Democrats' chances of obtaining a majority of votes for the 60 seats at stake, political observers believe.

Duarte tried to veto the coalition provision of the law, but the Supreme Court, whose justices were named by the assembly, overrode his action.

Ironically, in a country long accustomed to rule by a strongman, the assembly wields formidable power. It can effectively veto Duarte's budget and tax proposals. Any agreements reached to end El Salvador's civil war, such as amnesty, would require the approval of the assembly.

Land Reform Blocked

The legislature demonstrated its considerable muscle last summer by ending the last active land reform program in El Salvador.

Indirectly, it has also helped to delay prosecution in the Las Hojas massacre case. The assembly, using its constitutional powers, appointed the country's attorney general. He is an Arena party functionary who has neither carried out a further investigation of the massacre nor enforced warrants already outstanding for the arrests of those responsible.

The armed forces, meanwhile, have lost little of their traditional hold on power. Duarte's efforts to negotiate an end to the civil war with leftist rebels have made little progress, in part because of opposition by the military to concessions demanded by the rebels.

Also, the armed forces reportedly continue to shield their members from having to answer to charges of human rights abuses.

In the case of the Las Hojas massacre, no regular military man has been charged, although about 200 soldiers allegedly were on the

scene when the killings took place.

The officers in control of the troops, Col. Elmer Gonzalez and Capt. Salvador Figueroa Morales, remain on active duty.

The United States, a factor in El Salvador because of its economic aid and backing for Duarte's administration, has played an ambiguous role in recent months.

The United States spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on last year's Salvadoran election, channeling the money through the CIA, which gave the funds to trade unions supporting Duarte.

Since Duarte's inauguration in June, however, some U.S. Embassy officials reportedly have told rightist politicians that it would be best if the right continues to hold a majority in the assembly.

The State Department also lifted its ban on travel to the United States by Roberto D'Aubuisson, the Arena party's firebrand leader, who ran an unsuccessful presidential campaign against Duarte last year. Denying D'Aubuisson a visa had long symbolized U.S. disapproval of his alleged ties to death squad activity. The change in the U.S. attitude was seen in El Salvador as something of a blessing for Arena.

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The U.S. Embassy here continues to call for prosecution of cases such as the Las Hojas massacre. But the United States has not tried to enforce such calls by threatening to withhold aid to the Salvadoran military and economy, as it did in the case of four murdered U.S. churchwomen whose killers were prosecuted last spring.

The Las Hojas massacre occurred on Feb. 22, 1983. A land dispute between *campesinos* and local landowners set off the killings, residents say.

Civil defense militiamen in the employ of the landowners fingered the Indians as rebel sympathizers, according to local accounts. Soldiers, arriving in force in the early morning, dragged the victims from their homes, led them to a nearby river, bound them and shot each one in the head.

Visit by Pickering

"They took my father as he was getting ready for work," said Alfonso Marquez, 25. "I protested, but they said they would take me, too."

The government itself seemed revolted by the murders. Its own human rights commission investigated the incident. Top army officers promised justice, as did Duar-

te's predecessor, President Alvaro Magana.

The United States withdrew military trainers from the local brigade that was responsible for the killings. U.S. Ambassador Thomas R. Pickering paid an unpublicized visit to the massacre site.

Duarte, at the beginning of his term, said that the Las Hojas incident would be one of several important human rights cases his government would prosecute.

But so far, nothing concrete has occurred. The judge who was handling the case is running for a seat in the National Assembly as an Arena party candidate. At present there is no judge handling the case.

In any case, the Arena party judge once told reporters he feared for his life if he tried to pursue the criminals.

"They treat us like animals who are fit to be slaughtered," Francisca Jimenez, widow of one of the victims said. She said she is without support not only because of her husband's death but because the army has drafted her oldest son.

"Everyone has forgotten our murdered brothers," the Indian leader Esquino Lizco said at the commemorative Mass.