Arlington Central America Committee

NEWSLETTER

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A Desperate Flight from Terror to Sanctuary: Guatemalan Refugee to Speak Here May 18

"Cesar" has been living in the Arlington Street Church in Boston for over six months. A 21-year-old refugee from Guatemala, he could be arrested at any time and deported to his homeland. There he faces likely torture and death for speaking out against the army that, with U.S. military aid, has killed tens of thousands of civilians like him.

Nevertheless, he will speak publicly in the town of Arlington on Monday, May 18, at an educational forum sponsored by the Arlington Central America Committee.

Cesar's troubles with the army began at age 7, when soldiers shot and killed his sister, 16. Living with his mother and other siblings, he began working at age 9 at a Catholic church cooperative that provided food to the poor. A decade of service at the cooperative led to his arrest by the army, which accused him of being a guerrilla "for helping the poor."

He was taken to a prison with 14 other teenagers and kept in a cell knee-deep in water. At intervals, he and the others were taken out by the soldiers and tortured with knives and electricity. They were forced to watch one prisoner be crucified.

After two months only two were left alive. One night they were taken into the countryside, beaten savagely, and left for dead. Cesar eventually came to and made his way to a church, where he hid for two weeks while a doctor tended his wounds. His mother found him there and told him the army had learned he was alive. He fled across the border to Mexico, not knowing where next to go.

Hanging onto the sides of trains and begging food, he wandered Mexico for three months. Eventually he crossed into Texas. With the assistance of sanctuary workers, he was sent to a Washington, D.C. hospital for two months of treatment. There he was contacted by his mother, who told him his 25-year-old brother and an uncle had been tortured and killed by the army.

Cesar hid with families in Maryland and Connecticut before Rev. Victor Carpenter offered him the use of the Arlington Street Church. Despite the risks he faces in going public, he says he feels compelled "to inform the North American public about what is going on. That your president is sending bombs to our government."

GUATEMALA has been ruled directly or indirectly by the army since 1954, when a CIA-managed coup overthrew a reformist democratic government. For over 30 years, any sign of opposition to the military, or to exploitation of the country by U.S. fruit companies, was stamped out by the most savage and ruthless methods. By claiming that any opposition was communist, the government won the U.S. military aid it needed to stay in power.

Recently things have improved. The military allowed the election of a civilian president, Venicio Cerezo, raising excitement and hope among the Guatemalan people for the first time in a generation. But Cerezo's hands are largely tied, and killings and disappearances continue.

Cesar says his one hope is that his country will become safe enough for him to return.

In addition to Cesar's talk, there will be a 30-minute video documentary on the situation in Guatemala today made by the Guatemala Human Rights Commission, a civilian group in that country. It will be introduced by Sonia Lipson, New England representative of NISGUA, the Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala.

TIME & PLACE: Monday May 18, 7:30 p.m., Pleasant Street Congregational Church, 75 Pleasant St. (a block from Arlington Center toward Route 2). Free.