

NEWSLETTER

ARLINGTON CENTRAL AMERICA COMMITTEE

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REPORT FROM EL SALVADOR

Two Arlington residents who have travelled to Honduras and El Salvador in recent months to aid in the "repopulation" of Salvadoran refugees gave us a report at the December monthly meeting. Working through the Paulist Center, Louis Gutierrez last August visited the Mesa Grande refugee camps just across the Honduran border. Paul Lessin travelled to San Salvador and the village of Santa Marta in early November with a group from the SHARE Foundation.

At the time of Louis' trip, there were some 11,000 refugees in the U.N. administered camps at Mesa Grande, 4300 of whom returned to El Salvador in the October repatriation movement. Louis showed slides of the camp and described the conditions: hot, arid, poor soil for agriculture, and an undependable piped-in water supply. Many of the refugees have been there since 1980. Louis' group spoke with committees planning the October repopulation and took testimony from individuals concerning the conditions that led to their flight from El Salvador. A common theme was bombing, murder, and torture by the Salvadoran army, which is supported by U.S. aid and training. Louis found a well-organized infrastructure at the camp, including craft cooperatives administered by Catholic Relief Services that will provide skills alternative to farming for the returning refugees.

The purpose of the continuing Interfaith Task Force trips to El Salvador is to evince international interest in the repatriation and thereby put pressure on the Duarte government to respect the refugees' right to return and live in their villages without military harassment. Paul's trip coincided with the funeral for the murdered human right leader, Herbert Anaya, and because of travel restrictions his group was not allowed to travel to their intended destination. They did, however, go to Santa Marta, a resettled village in a less contested area. There he observed the temporary housing and beginnings of the new town: land cleared for permanent houses and community buildings and the beginnings of construction. The resettled villages are very dependent on international aid for the first year, to acquire the necessary construction materials, medical supplies, and agricultural tools. Food is also necessary as the first crops cannot be planted until April.

Paul also reported that the resettlement is not going smoothly—the movement itself was held up by bureaucratic and political maneuvers at the border and the Salvadoran military continues to pressure and intimidate the returnees. Examples of this have been reported in the North American press: the Air Force bombed several small villages near Santa Marta just prior to the refugees' return in an effort to frighten them. Since their return the military has maintained a strong presence, surrounding the villages and restricting travel to other communities, conducting military exercises just outside the villages, and entering villagers' homes at will. Paul also reported one attempt to weaken the village's unity by selectively handing out gifts and supplies in order to obtain the names of community leaders.

While Paul's and Louis' experiences provide some hope for the refugees' future in their description of the commitment, talents, and abilities of these people, their talk also pointed out the obstacles to this future, which some of us see as opportunities for involvement by the Arlington Central America Committee. *See article on Sister Cities*

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Following the visit of Salvadoran activist Mario Davila to our October monthly meeting, many members have decided to explore the possibility of adopting a Sister City in El Salvador. Sister Cities in the U.S. commit to provide moral, political, and financial support to Salvadoran refugees who wish to return to their villages in military zones in northern El Salvador. In addition, Sister City status provides a means for educating and involving the community in humanitarian aid to El Salvador. A Sister City Committee has formed to begin the adoption process. We need help in choosing a city, contacting people in Cambridge and Lexington for information on their Sister City projects, developing fund raising schemes, and thinking through community outreach projects. There will be a planning meeting on **Monday, January 11, 1988**. For more information on time and place, please call Cindy at 646-1071.

