

Salvadoran atrocities

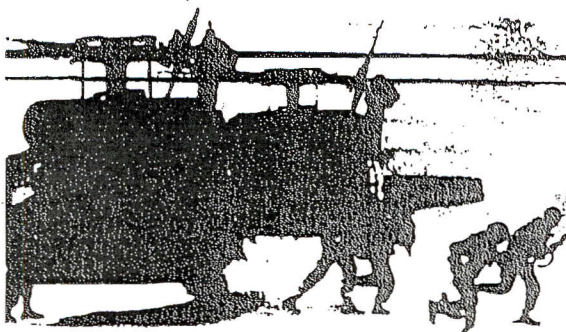
Refugee women and children

TEN WOMEN MET in an airless room with thick canvas walls and a sheet-metal roof. Dirt floors, wooden benches. The slimmest of cots. Rows of such rooms, thousands of them, each housing a family, share a plateau ringed with barbed wire. On the other side of that ring, Honduran soldiers, many of them still children, play in the trees, guns cocked. Some sleep in the boughs. To arrive here I passed through four or five checkpoints. Soldiers swarmed everywhere around them. Just beyond that last barricade, a dozen little girls watched me approach and shyly reached for my hands. They took me around those rows of rooms and other small boxlike

buildings—clinics and classrooms mostly—until we found the women with whom I sit now. We're crowded here. Any one of us could easily touch the others:

The women are Salvadoran, from rural hamlets. The place is Mesa Grande, a refugee camp in Honduras, about 40 miles from the Salvadoran border. Ten thousand have come here to live, about half that number under the age of seven. Women's meetings like the one I was attending occur regularly. A score of small support groups have sprung up in the camps.

"It helps to talk," said Rosa. Short enough and plump enough to seem endlessly round, she gave a breast to her child. "We women have never before turned to each other like this," added red-haired Luisa, her hands shoved in apron pockets, then tucked under her arms, hard against her breasts. Luisa's three children are dead, but not just that. Two years ago when the Salvadoran National Guard came to her village in United States-



supplied helicopters, they chopped all the children to bits and threw them to the village pigs. "The soldiers laughed all the while," Luisa told me. "What were they trying to kill?" she asked, crying, her hands now in the lap of that flowered apron.

We went around the circle. Each woman told her story. The same story. Each had had nothing. They had worked, generations of them, all day, every day on someone else's land. Their children were parasite-ridden or starving. Visits to the landowners, the *patrons*, eventually had brought in the Guard. "We asked for food. They gave us bullets," Mariella, her wrinkles like rivers, spoke for the group.

And so it began. Some of them sided with the guerrillas, the *muchachos*, they call them. Some tried to remain neutral. The Guard honored no such distinctions as they returned again and again to a village. It wasn't just Luisa. All of the women still had tears to cry as they told of brothers, husbands gathered into a circle and set on fire after their legs had been broken. They told of trees heavy with women hanging by the wrists, a sister or a god-

mother among them, all with breasts cut off and facial skin peeled back, all slowly bleeding to death. A frenzy went with each telling, as though the women had yet to find a place inside themselves to contain it. Now, to my right one of the women was rocking another. Everyone was trembling.

Later, Rosa, her baby on her hip, walked with me over to a dusty open field, the camp's playground. A hundred homemade kites crackled in the wind above the sunset; lots of giggling when kites entangled. "We have found a voice," Rosa told me. "Together we write poems and songs about our poor Salvador. But our men feel they must suffer in silence. It breaks them," she added softly. "If we can do little for our men, at least we can work to help our children."

The camp is under the auspices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, with support from Catholic Relief Services and other volunteer agencies. Nearly everybody is busy with various workshops, woodworking or sewing among them, and with the literacy classes. But the support from international agencies often falls short, and the people improvise. A ten-year-old may teach the alphabet to a classroom of grandparents.

I met the mother of one such boy earlier in the women's group. When he has a chance to use the camp's crayons and paper, Carlos draws little round circles in little blue streams. "Heads," he explains with no expression on his face or body. He was one of many living at Mesa Grande who witnessed the 1981 Sumpul River Massacre. Thousands of refugees were attacked by both Salvadoran and Honduran soldiers, on either side of the river. They were attempting to cross out of Salvador after their villages had been burned. At least 600 Salvadoran refugees had been killed there. Carlos tucked in his shirt and wandered off to a friend. "You see the work we must do," his mother said, her voice too low for him to hear. She bent over a small clay mound of an oven.

Mesa Grande is in the mountains. The nights are cool. The camp is quiet and dark. Someone is spooked by a footstep. "The children want to live where there are no soldiers." I was told that again and again as though telling it could make it happen.

Even if the mid-October meeting in La Palma is the first step, not a false one, toward the end of the fighting, the wounds are deep, the scars enduring.

I had known the women's experiences were terrible. But I couldn't have imagined their faces as they were remembering. Luisa had said, "After seeing certain things one is never not afraid again." True now for me as well as for them.

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