

# PBI in El Salvador

## *PBI Meets a Changed El Salvador*

The first tasks of the team which returned to El Salvador in April 1990 were to examine and assess the new and different situation so as to adjust the work to the changed conditions, priorities and requirements; to renew contact with the grass-roots organizations with which PBI had worked in the past, helped by the fact that PBI volunteers had been maintaining contact as much as possible; and to achieve the degree of official recognition and guarantees to ensure the safety, permanence and freedom from obstruction of the team and its work. The team consisted initially of four long-serving members of the 1989 team, gradually building up to a team of nine by November 1990.

Characteristics of the situation in El Salvador during 1990 with particular meaning for PBI's work included the following: 1) the peace negotiations between the government and the FMLN, now under UN auspices, 2) the continuation of the war, with varying levels of intensity, and with constant rumors of another "November '89" style offensive, 3) an immensely dynamic and broadly based civic peace movement coordinated by the Permanent Committee of the National Debate (CPDN), 4) a broad "convergence" or coordination of opposition

political parties and of labor, peasant and other grass-roots organizations, including both the traditional left and those oriented to the Christian Democrat Party, 5) labor unions and other grassroots organizations focusing more clearly on their members' basic needs, as well as on the peace process, 6) and in the capital (but not in the countryside) from April to October, a more relaxed atmosphere. Labor union offices were not attacked, riot police were not present at demonstrations, and there were fewer arrests in the city compared with 1989.

As a consequence most of the organizations and individuals whom the team had provided accompaniment in the past, did not see having a constant presence as a priority. The team continued to accompany Lutheran Bishop Don Medardo Gomez on an on-going basis, while making frequent visits to other organizations so as to be aware of any security problems which might arise. From mid-October onwards, the national level of tension rose sharply to the approaching anniversaries of the FENASTRAS (National Federation of Salvadoran Workers) bombing (October 31), the FMLN offensive (November 11) and the massacre of the Jesuits (November 16), combined with stronger than ever rumors of a new offensive. This situation created new requests for a PBI presence which was provided for the FENASTRAS office and for other individuals and organizations.

## Return To El Salvador Backed By International Community

The Armed Forces' arrest and harassment of many international workers, including PBI volunteers, in November 1989 during the FMLN offensive in El Salvador, led PBI to leave the country until safe conditions for working there were restored. In April, PBI sent a delegation to El Salvador for extensive meetings to ensure that such conditions existed and to lay the groundwork for PBI's return.

The delegation's arrival was accompanied by an international campaign affirming the need for PBI's work. If PBI was to provide any security for Salvadorans, the Salvadoran authorities needed to know that the international community was aware of its purpose and activities. The delegation, then, carried individual letters from 87 members of Parliament and Congress from Switzerland, Canada, Spain, United States, Italy, Sweden, France and Germany, as well as from the World Council of Churches, Pax Christi International, labor unions, religious communities and bishops, development organizations, and local officials.

The delegation was composed of Eve Scarfe, a member of the El Salvador team for most of 1989 and 1990, John Lindsay-Poland, then Chair of PBI's Central American Project Committee, and Lotti Buser, European Coordinator of PBI's Central American Projects. Their 17

meetings included a wide range of Salvadorans, from President Cristiani to an agricultural cooperative in the coastal province of La Libertad, from Lutheran Bishop Medardo Gomez to the Christian Committee of the Displaced.

The visit came during a remarkable opening in Salvadoran political life, when hopes for a negotiated solution to the eleven-year war were heightened. Labor leader, Humberto Centeno told the group that PBI should return to El Salvador and open dialogue with a wide variety of groups, making its presence as public as possible. President Cristiani, while his reception was cool, promised to help facilitate PBI's legal status in the country. Bishop Gomez had received threats to his life and feared that those opposing negotiations might attempt to ruin them by attacking advocates for the process such as himself. Rev. Edgar Palacios, Coordinator of the National Debate Committee, was excited at the possibilities of PBI's Peace Education workshops at the grassroots level.

Based on all the information gathered, the Central American Project Committee met by conference call and decided that a PBI team should re-enter El Salvador as soon as possible and begin work. The team returned to El Salvador in late April.

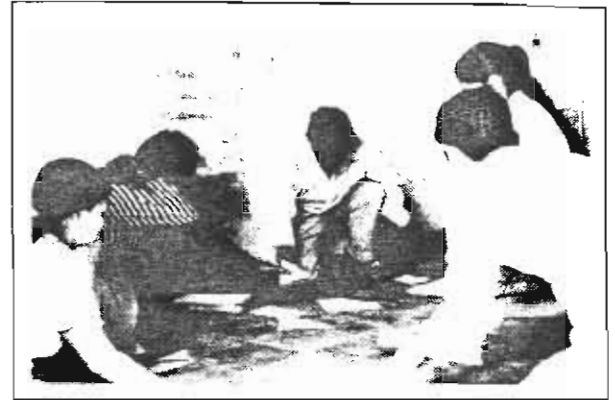


Throughout the year, PBI provided a presence as requested at a wide range of special events, such as peace marches, peace festivals and religious ceremonies organized by the CPDN in the capital and in provincial cities (San Miguel, Usulután and Chalatenango), and inaugural ceremonies at new "re poblaciones" (repopulation centers for refugees and displaced people returning to

*PBI members accompanied the repatriation and repopulation movement, being with the refugees or displaced people as they struggled through bureaucratic and military obstacles.*

the countryside) such as "Comunidad Ignacio Ellacuría" in Chalatenango province, and "Comunidad Martín - Baró" in Morazán province. Team members also accompanied a caravan of several thousand people in 32 buses from Ciudad Segundo Montes and other communities in Morazán, who were attempting to attend a peace march being organized by the CPDN in San Salvador on September 15 (Independence Day).

As in past years, PBI members accompanied the repatriation and repopulation movement, being with the refugees or displaced people as they struggled through bureaucratic and military obstacles. Two examples where substantial difficulties were encountered were the repopulation organized by CRIPDES (Christian Committee for the Displaced) in San Vicente province in December and the case of the Salvadoran refugees in Panama. In the former PBI volunteers accompanied the



*Peace education workshops help facilitate grassroots participation in the peace process.* PBI Photo

27 families (about 150 people) during 6 days that they were encamped on a roadside blocked by the military. Eventually they were allowed to resettle though not in the place they had intended. In Panama the 600 Salvadoran refugees in the "Ciudad Romero" settlement had decided to repopulate, and Salvadoran church organizations requested the PBI team to accompany the process.

### *Workshops with Grassroots Organizations*

1990 saw a growing demand for peace education workshops within the context of the grassroots organizations' need to give more impetus to the peace process. Two series of workshops were held as part of the CPDN's program of activities, one in San Salvador and the other in the countryside.

Workshops were also held with the social services division of the Ministry of Education, and with groups of psychologists and mental health workers, PBI members also participated in conferences on international law, and on the psychological effects of war and violence.

### *Legal Matters*

It was not possible in 1990 to obtain legally recognized status for PBI in El Salvador, nor to solve the problems of longer-term residence permits for individual members. This was despite the fact that the team followed the procedures recommended by President Cristiani to the Exploratory Commission in April, 1990, has maintained contact with designated members of the President's staff, and invested considerable time and effort in these matters. It is hoped that these efforts will bear fruit in 1991.



*Grassroots organizations united in 1990 to work for a negotiated end to the war as well as to meet their economic needs.* PBI Photo

## The Refugees Of Ciudad Romero

Since 1980, 610 Salvadoran refugees from the war-torn Department of La Union have lived in Panama. There, in an isolated and densely wooded area, they founded a self-sufficient community in exile: Ciudad Romero.

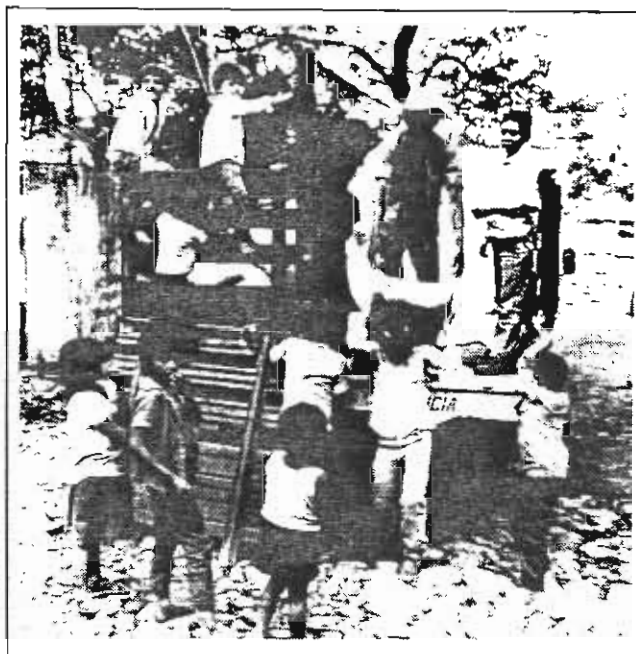
Now, like thousands of other refugees in the last two years, they have decided to return to El Salvador. They don't have the officially required papers. They have no means of transportation. And, despite the fact that the constitution guarantees them such a right, they don't know if the government will let them enter the country and settle on the land they have chosen.

On November 19, after a difficult four-day journey, a group of 110 refugees from Ciudad Romero arrived in Panama City. Two members of the Salvadoran team - Pepe and Stewart - joined them in Panama City on November 19. They were the only foreigners there to share those difficult days of nonviolent struggle in defense of their rights as refugees.

On December 1, Stewart and an Australian journalist left from Colón for the Belen river, where the refugee community was located. They travelled in a fragile "cayuco," a traditional homemade craft made from a large tree trunk and powered by an outboard motor. For twelve hours the group were brutally tossed in every manner possible. It was as if someone was continually throwing barrels of water on them. In the midst of the crossing, the motor died, stranding them for a half hour. Near the end of the trip the motor failed again, leaving them at the mercy of the raging sea during the hour-and-a-half repair job. The two had planned to return in two days in the company of 120 refugees in a hired boat. But technical difficulties postponed the trip for a week, and finally, one of the two was able to return; Stewart had to stay, even though he had brought only enough clothes for two days.

The return trip was an authentic odyssey: 170 people huddled in a little boat, the majority in the stern covered with an awning, the space filled with smoke and the vomit of seasick people and pigs, while some ten people sprawled in the prow in constant danger of being tossed into the sea. Two more similar trips were necessary in order to finally reunite all of the community in the capital on December 23.

In Panama city the refugees held a sit-in in front of the Salvadoran Embassy to protest bureaucratic delays in their repatriation. Finally, in mid-January 1991, "Ciudad Romero" reached El Salvador, accompanied by PBI, and is resettling in Usulután province.



*Residents of repopulation rebuild their community after many years' absence. PBI Photo*

What follows are selections from a report written by Stewart while in Panama.

*They were gathered in a church. There were 110 of them--seniors, men, women, and children, some of whom seemed to be no more than seven or eight years old.*

*They were about to eat their first decent meal and spend their first dry night sleeping indoors in days. They had just completed a four-day trek through the jungle that separates Ciudad Romero - the name they had given to their refugee settlement - from the nearest road. While a Spanish nurse who had accompanied them on their journey tended to their cut and blistered feet, we listened to various accounts of the hardships of the journey: how they had to slash their way through underbrush with machetes; how they had to climb up and down slippery slopes to cross mountains; how they had to make a stretcher for someone injured in a fall; how they had to use ropes to get across swollen rivers; how they had to sleep sitting in the mud, covered only with a small piece of plastic.*

*Yes, they were certainly tired when we first met them, but they were not sleepy. They were far too excited about going to El Salvador and about being in contact with civilization to even think about going to sleep. Only at about two in the morning, after talking, singing and playing music did some of them finally get some sleep.*

*Yet everyone seems to be in good spirits, and there is a real sense of cooperation and community. Here in the church, if you forget to take your money out of your pockets before washing your pants, you can set it out to dry on a piece of newspaper in the middle of the floor, and no one will steal it. I know, because I've seen it happen. ♦*

