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HEADLINE: Salvadoran Peasants Describe Mass Killing;
Woman Tells of Children's Death

BYLINE: By Alma Guillermoprieto, Special to The Washington Post

DATELINE: MOZOTE, El Salvador, Jan. 14 (Delayed)

BODY:

Several hundred civilians, including women and children, were taken from their homes in and around this village and killed by Salvadoran Army troops during a December offensive against leftist guerrillas, according to three survivors who say they witnessed the alleged massacres.

Reporters taken to tour the region and speak to the survivors by guerrilla soldiers, who control large areas of Morazan Province, were shown the rubble of scores of adobe houses they and the survivors said were destroyed by the troops in the now deserted village community. Dozens of decomposing bodies still were seen beneath the rubble and lying in nearby fields, despite the month that has passed since the incident.

In Washington, Salvadoran Ambassador Ernesto Rivas Gallont said, "I reject emphatically that the Army of El Salvador" was engaged in "killing women and children. It is not within the armed institutions' philosophy to act like that." He acknowledged that the "armed forces have been active in that part of the country," particularly during a December offensive against the guerrillas, but said that their actions had "definitely not been against the civilian populations."

The survivors, including a woman who said her husband and four of her six children were killed, maintained that no battle was under way during the second week in December when the alleged massacre took place.

The woman, Rufina Amaya, a 38-year-old housewife, said that the troops entered the village one morning and, after herding the residents into two separate groups--men divided from women and children--took them off and shot them. Amaya said she had hidden during the shooting and later escaped to the guerrilla-protected camp where she was interviewed.

At the same time, troops allegedly spread into the nearby countryside and smaller surrounding villages. Jose Marcial Martinez, 14, from nearby La Joya, said he had hidden in a cornfield and watched his parents, brothers and sisters killed. Jose Santos, 15, said he had witnessed the similar slaying of his parents, three younger brothers and two grandparents.

A dozen other persons from the area interviewed by this correspondent said they had fled their homes during the December offensive and claimed to have lost family members in the military assault.

To reach the heart of Morazan Province from the north, it is necessary to walk for several days, passing through villages and guerrilla camps. After several months of requests, the Farabundo Marti Liberation Front agreed to take this correspondent into the province in early January, two weeks after the guerrillas' clandestine radio station first reported the alleged massacres in Morazan. It was clear that the guerrillas' purpose was not only to demonstrate to journalists their control of the region, but also to provide what they said was evidence of the alleged massacre in December.

As we neared Mozote, the group of young guerrillas who were my guides and I passed on foot through the village of Arambala, whose pretty, whitewashed adobe houses appeared to have been looted of all contents. The village was deserted.

About 45 minutes farther down the road, we entered another small town. Here the houses also were gutted and looted, but the overwhelming initial impression was of the sickly sweet smell of decomposing bodies. This was Mozote.

The muchachos boys, as the guerrillas are called, walked us toward the central square where the ruins of what had been a small, whitewashed church stood. The walls of the smaller sacristy beside it also appeared to have had its adobe walls pushed in. Inside, the stench was overpowering, and countless bits of bones--skulls, rib cages, femurs, a spinal column--poked out of the rubble.

The 15 houses on the main village street had been smashed. In two of them, as in the sacristy, the rubble was filled with bones. All of the buildings, including the three in which body parts could be seen, appeared to have been set on fire, and the remains of the people were as charred as the remaining beams.

Several small rural roads led away from the village to other groups of houses that collectively are known as the Mozote community. We walked down one, an idyllic path where every house had a grove of fruit trees, a small chicken pen and at least one beehive. Only the fruit trees were intact; the hives were overturned, the bees buzzing everywhere. The houses were destroyed and looted.

The road was littered with animal corpses, cows and horses. In the cornfields behind the houses were more bodies, these unburned by fire but baked by the sun. In one grouping in a clearing in a field were 10 bodies: two elderly people, two children, one infant--a bullet hole in the head--in the arms of a woman, and the rest adults. Although local peasants later said they had buried some of the bodies in the area, the guerrilla youths acknowledged they had asked that the corpses be left until someone from the outside could be brought to see them.

It was getting dark, and we traveled to a guerrilla military encampment.

The camp was populated by about 20 young guerrillas, all armed and obviously under military discipline. Farther down the road was a civilian camp, like the other a collection of small adobe houses, with about 80 peasants, refugees and guerrilla sympathizers. It was from this camp the next morning that the guerrillas sent for Amaya, who said she was the only survivor she knew of from Mozote.

The guerrillas left me alone to talk to her. She said that it was on the evening of Dec. 11, although she spoke more of days of the week than dates, that troops of the Atlacatl Brigade had come to Mozote. The brigade is an elite, 1,000-man unit of the Salvadoran Army, well known at least by name to most Salvadorans, that has been trained for rapid deployment and antiguerrilla offensives by U.S. military advisers here.

"The Army people had warned Marcos Diaz, a friend of theirs from our village, that an offensive was coming and that there would be no more traffic allowed from San Francisco Gotera [the provincial capital] in December and that we should all stay in Mozote where no one would harm us. So we did. There were about 500 of us in all living in the village."

The soldiers, she said, took those villagers who were in their homes and made them stand outside "in the road for about 1 1/2 hours. They took our money, searched the houses, ate our food, asked us where the guns were and went away. We were happy then. 'The repression is over,' we said. They didn't kill anybody."

Amaya spoke with what appeared to be controlled hysteria. During our conversation, she broke down only when speaking of what she said were the deaths of her children. She said that while her two surviving sons have joined the guerrillas since the December incident, Mozote was not predominantly proguerrilla, although it is in the heart of a rebel zone.

She said the guerrillas had gone around the villages in early December warning the population of an impending government offensive and instructing civilians to head for towns and refugee camps outside the area.

"But because we knew the Army people, we felt safe," she said. Her husband, who Amaya said was on very good terms with the local military, "had a military safe conduct."

At around 5:30 the morning after their initial visit, she said, the troops, headed by the same officer she called Lt. Ortega, returned to Mozote. She said they herded the people into the tiny village square in front of the church, men in one line and women and children in another.

"Marcos Diaz, who had been told by the Army we would be safe, and my husband were in the men's line. I counted about 80 men and 90 women not including the children."

She said the women were herded with their children into a house on the square. From there they saw the men being blindfolded and bound, kicked and thrown against each other, then taken away in groups of four and shot.

"The soldiers had no fury," she said. "They just observed the lieutenant's orders. They were cold. It wasn't a battle.

"Around noon they began with the women. First they picked out the young girls and took them away to the hills. Then they picked out the old women and took them to Israel Marquez's house on the square. We heard the shots there. Then they started with us in groups. When my turn came and I was being led away to Israel Marquez's house I slipped behind a tree and climbed up. I saw the lieutenant then. He was personally machine-gunning people."

"I heard the soldiers talking," she continued tonelessly. "An order arrived from a Lt. Caceres to Lt. Ortega to go ahead and kill the children too. A soldier said, 'Lieutenant somebody here says he won't kill children.' 'Who's the sonofabitch who said that?' the lieutenant answered. 'I am going to kill him.' I could hear them shouting from where I was crouching in the tree.

"I could hear the children crying. I heard my own children. When it was all over late at night the lieutenant ordered the soldiers to put a torch to the corpses. There was a great fire in the night."

Amaya said she escaped while the fire was still burning. "I heard the soldiers say 'Let's go. Witches could come out of the fire.' Then they left to go on what they called a 'combing operation' in the houses on the hills. I started walking and walked for three nights. In the daytime I hid because there were troops everywhere."

Amaya, as well as the two boys who said they witnessed their families being killed, emphasized that the troops appeared to be in regular radio contact with someone.

I later saw Amaya in the civilian camp down the road, where I also met the two boys. Although they were the only ones who claimed to have witnessed the killing, nearly everyone in the camp said they had come there because of "the repression in December" and claimed to have lost members of their families.

[In Washington, Ambassador Rivas, in denying the accuracy of this account Tuesday, said that "serious efforts" were being made to stem armed forces abuses and that this was the "type of story that leads us to believe there is a plan" to discredit the ongoing electoral process in El Salvador, and to discredit the armed forces "or to take credit away from the certification President Reagan must make to Congress."

This week the Reagan administration must by law certify to Congress that the Salvadoran leadership "is achieving substantial control over all elements of its own armed forces, so as to bring to an end the indiscriminate torture and murder of Salvadoran citizens by these forces," or risk a cutoff of aid to El Salvador under congressional restrictions.]

GRAPHIC: Map, no caption, By Ricahrd Fruno; Picture, Man searches through rubble in Salvadoran village of Mozote where Army offensive reportedly killed hundreds of civilians. By Susan Meiselas -- Magnum

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH



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