In publishing edited extracts of the Central America Testimony, the Central America Week Coordinating Committee hopes to promote a greater understanding of the experience of the poor in Central America, and to increase awareness of the urgent need to relieve poverty and suffering in the region.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the individuals who gave evidence to the Testimony, and not necessarily those of the Coordinating Committee.

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GUATEMALA

Since the military coup which overthrew the reformist government in 1954, Guatemala has been ruled by a succession of right-wing regimes and military juntas. The army has fought a long-running battle against guerrilla movements, which continues despite the country’s return to civilian government in 1985. Poverty is rife, especially among the Indians, who form 65 per cent of the population.

GUATEMALA: THE BISHOP OF GLOUCESTER
(visited Central America in January 1988)

In a little town high in the mountains we met Pedro, who has been the Protestant minister there for 17 years. He told us that, although in law he was not supposed to, he was forced to serve in what is called the Civil Patrol, who are armed men acting as auxiliaries to the military, a kind of Home Guard. He had to slaughter the animals of Indians, and cut down their corn when it was ripe for harvest, simply to force them out of the villages which the army wanted to clear to make a kind of no-man’s land. The Indian families fled, sometimes for years, up into the hills, where their standard of living was even more desperate than it had been in their traditional villages.

(from the GLOUCESTER Testimony)

GUATEMALA: CATH YIE, a teacher from Redditch
(visited Central America in 1985/1986)

We were able to visit some of the ‘model villages’ which the army sees as the solution to the poverty of Guatemala. New homes have been built, with electricity and water supplies, but the inhabitants have been forced to live in them. The villages are fenced in and patrolled by the army, and the people are not allowed to leave. There are turrets with guards with machine guns watching them. They all have to go to bed at certain times, and get up at certain times. They have no land, so they cannot support themselves. They receive their food from the army as rations, to prevent them from supporting the guerrillas – which is what they do, according to the army. They have to work for the army for their food. The army calls it development, but it amounts to a concentration-camp existence.

(from the BIRMINGHAM Testimony)
After a year in the refuge, they still hadn’t ventured out into the streets.

GUATEMALA: THE BISHOP OF GALLOWAY

(visited Central America in October/November 1987)

When we were in the city of Coban, which is about 100 miles from Guatemala City, we visited a group of 100 Indians, whose story was this: they had been in the mountains for two years, having fled there from the army, which was hunting them down.

To escape the kidnapping, torture, and massacre which have been the fate of many other Indian communities, the men, women and children all took to the mountains. After two years their state was so bad, through disease and hunger, that they decided they would have to surrender. But the Bishop of Coban heard that they were coming down from the mountains, and he was able to go and meet them, and give them refuge in a building that belonged to the diocese. We met them there and heard their story. They had been there a year since they emerged from the mountains, but they still hadn’t ventured out into the streets, for fear of what would happen to them.

(from the EDINBURGH Testimony)
I live in Rochester. I have three children, and I teach in a junior school in Gravesend.

I visited a town which is completely under military control. I was in a convent which had been taken over by the army as an interrogation centre. They gave half the convent back to the sisters, and kept the other half. The sisters ran a project for women whose husbands had disappeared. While I was there an Indian woman came in, looking for her husband, who had been detained by the army a week before. It is general policy to detain and interrogate any man who comes down from the mountains. And if the army is not satisfied, nothing more is seen of the man. Well, it had been a week. She couldn't find any information from the army at all. She came in desperation to the sisters, who said, 'We can do nothing.' And this is happening all the time: the men go in – and they just don't appear again. I was not allowed to stay there for the night, because the sisters said it was too distressing: during the night you could hear the screams of the prisoners being tortured. There were hundreds of women in that town whose husbands and sons had literally disappeared. They had been disappeared for three, four, five years.

... I visited a Government clinic where there was a doctor and a nurse and a pair of scales. There were no other supplies at all. And the doctor gave the Indians prescriptions. Well, when you walked out of that clinic, there was all screwed-up paper on the floor. We walked down the road, and a couple of women with children came up to us and asked for help. One of the women was in a terrible condition. She had had dysentery for a month, and she was almost unable to stand. She had been given a prescription, but had no money for medicines. We went to a Mennonite pharmacy and bought the medicines for them. It cost £5.00 to buy enough medicines to destroy the parasites for this family of four. Now, if they work, they get perhaps 25 pence a day on the coffee plantation. And most of the time they're not working. There's no welfare, no financial help at all. So the nuns have set up what is called a 'revolving fund': they buy medicines, and then they ask the Indian people to bring what money they can spare, even if it's the equivalent of an old farthing, to help someone else to obtain treatment. They contribute a tiny amount, but at least it's building up a sense of community.

(from the CANTERBURY Testimony)
I accompanied two children, one of whom was disabled, who went to Guatemala as reporters for the BBC TV programme, 'John Craven’s Newsround'. We filmed the lives of street children in Guatemala City. They sleep in cardboard boxes, under bridges, or in shop doorways. These children were open to every sort of abuse you could imagine. Girls and boys were trained as pick-pockets and thieves by ‘Fagins’. The girls were often destined for lives of prostitution. In fact, nothing much was done for the girls on the streets, because the general feeling was that they could always earn their living by prostitution, so why worry? The boys were those of most concern.

The first question that Paul was always asked was, ‘Do you know your father and mother? Have you got a father and mother?’ – because most of the boys hadn’t. We saw children who didn’t get enough money to feed themselves. They turned to sniffing paint thinners. They had lemonade bottles, filled with paint thinner, and bits of rag. They would sniff the paint thinner to dull the pains of hunger. Because hunger is painful. So by 5 o’clock in the evening the children were reeling around the streets, in a very sad and sorry way. We didn’t get out of our minibus, because I thought our two children might be distressed by it. They were horrified, just looking out of the window.

We saw the work of a small charity whose ‘street workers’ actually lived on the streets with the boys. They were their friends. If the boys were injured in street fights, they would be called out at any time of the day or night to administer first aid. You don’t go to hospital and get treatment in Guatemala if you haven’t got any money. Everything has to be paid for in Guatemala. If you are ill, you either live or you die.

(from the NEWCASTLE Testimony)
EL SALVADOR

More than a quarter of El Salvador's population have been forced from their homes, and countless church workers, trade union officials, and community leaders have 'disappeared' in the nine-year war between the army and the opponents of the government. Mounting economic crisis, and the continuing civil war, have eroded support for the centre-right government, and the far right are expected to take control in the general elections in March 1989.

EL SALVADOR: FATHER GILBERT MARKUS, a Dominican priest from Oxford

(visited Central America in 1987)

Arriving in El Salvador from Nicaragua, one of the things that struck me most forcefully was the fear that I so often sensed in the people I spoke to. On buses, in shops, and on the streets people seemed nervous about talking to me, unwilling to say what they really thought.

I met a woman buying beans in a small town, and I asked her what she thought about what was happening in that area, where the army were particularly active. She began to tell me how patriotic they were, how they were very brave and 'defending us against communism'.

But later that evening, as the local priest took me visiting some of his parishioners, we found ourselves in her house. We recognised each other, and the priest introduced me. Knowing who I was now, she felt secure enough to tell me her story. A few months previously, she had sent her two sons down to the river with a bag of tortillas, to bathe and have a picnic. They went down and didn't come back. The next day their bodies were found by the riverside. Their eyes had been gouged out, they had been castrated, their teeth had been knocked out, and they had been shot. They were 11 and 13 years old.

When this was publicly denounced, the army replied that the boys had been 'communists'. Meanwhile, soldiers visited the mother and offered to pay the funeral expenses. She refused, and told them to leave her and the rest of her children alone. A few days later they reappeared with plastic cars and other toys, which they gave to her children. This was apparently part of the army's Christmas campaign to win 'the hearts and minds of the people'.

(from the OXFORD Testimony)
The first time I saw the mountainside burning, I thought it was a new way to celebrate the New Year.

EL SALVADOR: EILEEN CONWAY, a nurse from Belfast

(worked in El Salvador in 1987)

I worked in El Salvador for five months as a nurse with the Sisters of Saint Clare. We were in a war zone about 100 miles east of the capital. There were three camps, housing people whose homes had been burned out by the military. The first time I saw the mountainside burning it was New Year’s Eve, and I thought it was a new way to celebrate the new year. But I found out that it was a way of destroying the land so that the guerrillas could be seen. There were mortar attacks every night. We would see helicopters going out every night with machine guns, their noses sticking out of the helicopters, which were flying very low, shooting all around.

In the camps there was a lot of malnutrition and tuberculosis, and chest and eye infections. The houses were made of sugar cane and sticks. The floors were just dirt. Chickens, pigs, ducks and people slept together. The poverty was just incredible. I never saw anything like it in my whole life . . .

Despite the torture, the rapes and the murders by the military, the mood in the camps was one of hope. The people stood up and said, ‘We have dignity, we have a right to health and to education.’ That was very good to see.

(from the BELFAST Testimony)
EL SALVADOR: GRAHAM BURT, an Oxfam education worker from Nottingham

(visited Central America in January/February 1988)

I suppose most people think of refugees as people who are passive, traumatised, and dependent on outside agencies and food relief. But the opposite is true for the Salvadoran refugees we met in the Mesa Grande camp just over the border in Honduras. It is a depressing, windswept place, with only the most basic facilities provided by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. But the people have organised themselves, and run workshops in car mechanics, embroidery, pottery, musical instrument making, carpentry, art, and agriculture. There is a school garden, and an educational programme for adults as well as children.

These are skills that Salvadorans can take back to El Salvador. They insist that their own culture should be kept alive among the young children, some of whom have a very vague memory of their homeland. Things like school gardens are fundamentally important for young children who have no knowledge of crop farming. When they return to El Salvador, most of them will go back to the land full of hope.

We visited the camp art shop. Traditional Salvadoran art now incorporates images of bodies floating down the river, and villages which are totally empty. But it also depicts messages of optimism: hands reaching up to the sky, and vivid images of the dove of peace.

(from the BIRMINGHAM Testimony)
It was very frightening. I began to wish I was safely back home.

**EL SALVADOR: MALCOLM LOVE, a Baptist minister from Battersea**

(visited Central America in 1987)

In El Salvador the poor are automatically identified with the guerrillas, and considered a legitimate target by the armed forces. The area around Guazapa in the north of the country was systematically bombed in a military exercise called Operation Phoenix. Hundreds of people were left dead and maimed. Hundreds more fled to Honduras to escape the bombardment, and the survivors now live there in refugee camps.

During my stay I travelled up to El Poy, a town on the border with Honduras. Four and a half thousand refugees from a camp over the border were returning home. They were very frightened. They asked to be allowed to stay together, and to hold a communion service in the cathedral in San Salvador. Both requests were refused. It was a very anxious time for them.

On the way back from El Poy we came across two buses, part of the refugee convoy, pulled up by the side of the road. The military wanted them to turn left away from the main road, and cross over a rickety bridge into a road which the people suspected of having been mined. The bus drivers refused to leave the main road. Along with some other observers I started talking to the people and taking photographs. After a while a troop-carrier came along, and out jumped soldiers carrying M16 automatic weapons. It was very frightening, and I began to wish I was safely back home. The soldiers talked to us for a while, and eventually allowed the buses and ourselves to continue our journey. We like to think that our presence made a difference – but the event was a form of intimidation which is common in El Salvador.

(from the FINCHLEY Testimony)
Despite huge amounts of North American aid, Honduras is the third poorest country in the Western hemisphere. The ‘aid’ is mostly military assistance, for Honduras is the main base for the US forces’ supply and surveillance operations in Central America. The power of the army is growing, despite the election of a civilian government in 1982. Most of the best land is occupied by banana and coffee plantations, and cattle ranches. Peasants live on the margins of the economy, and unemployment in the cities is high.

HONDURAS: THE REV. MICHAEL AUSTIN, from Bolton

(worked in Honduras from 1982 to 1987)

I spent five years working as a Methodist minister in Honduras. During that time the American forces began to use the country as a base for their supply and surveillance operations in Central America. I was all the time aware of the ever-increasing military presence in Honduras. I used to travel occasionally to the capital, Tegucigalpa. When I first made the journey there was a small military base in the Comayagua Valley, which was used by the Honduran military. When I left, there was a highly sophisticated military installation full of satellite dishes and goodness knows what else. Of course, the Americans said that it was not actually a permanent base, it was just there to service their troops for six months at a time, but it was very marked, the way that one saw this enormous base growing.

Although Honduras is desperately poor, the situation need not be hopeless. In the 1970s various land reforms were passed, and people have been able to participate in some of the structures of government, and in their own trade unions. It’s nothing like what we know in our country, but at least the poor in Honduras have not traditionally had the sense of powerlessness that exists in El Salvador and Guatemala: there is a sense that if only they could make the structures of government work, they could actually work on behalf of the people. But the militarisation of Honduras has actually brought more repression into the country over the last few years. It has given more power to the military, who seem to think they can act in the same way that the army has traditionally acted in El Salvador and Guatemala – so the Americans have defeated their own object, in that democratic control in Honduras has been reduced, rather than strengthened.

(from the MANCHESTER Testimony)
When we were leaving the north coast there were heavy storms which washed away a bridge on the main road south. The people living below the road were flooded out and freezing. The papers blamed the severity of the flood on deforestation by peasants desperate for a plot of land to work on the steep hillsides. The prime flat agricultural land is devoted to export crops.

We were given a tremendous welcome wherever we went, and fed on the best food that they could give us. I could fill this testimony with dozens of stories of the courageous and generous men and women we met, who were so open and direct, with an astonishing wry sense of humour towards their own predicament.

Don Raphael was one of them. He invited us to his home to meet his family and see his work. Although he had to rely on his daughter for reading and writing, he seized every opportunity to try out new growing techniques on his precipitous hillside. His latest project was a fish tank, to provide protein for his family. But obtaining fish from the nearest supplier meant a journey of eight hours in a bucket in the back of a pick-up truck, on roads hacked out of the mountain: a journey which was more than most fish could take. But Don Raphael was not to be defeated. He told us he would keep trying.

(from the LEEDS Testimony)
I visited Honduras at Christmas time. The market in Tegucigalpa was full of decorations and presents: plastic rattles, posters of pop stars, toy tanks, but virtually no food. The newspaper proudly reported that Honduras had managed to pay 138 million dollars in interest to foreign banks last year, so that 'we can still keep our heads high in the world of international finance'. Honduras exports flowers to Miami and imports eggs from El Salvador. In the south people are dying of starvation.

In the cathedral next to the market place there was a wedding. The pews were hung with bouquets of orchids and pink ribbon. Guards held back the crowds as the guests queued up for communion. Each one was a portrait of privilege: a man with gold on every finger, gold chains through his waistcoat; a woman shimmering in a black sequin dress, threads of diamonds glittering in her ears; a stiff old woman in black lace leaning on her ivory walking stick. The bishop, sweating in his heavy robes, put a wafer on each tongue, and the society photographer in his cheap suit flashed his camera. Half a dozen urchin children in dusty rags stared from their hiding place behind statues of saints.

In the square outside, a man with a book in his hand was calling to the crowd: 'If you feel miserable, if you haven't got the happiness you deserve, then let the light of Jesus into your hearts . . . The end of time is growing near, when sinners will be cast into the lake of fire.' Then a group from El Salvador sang carols through a tinny PA, four men in black suits and four women in identical blue, like nuns in evening dress. They sang a seamless lounge-bar arrangement of 'O Come All Ye Faithful'. Laid out on the pavement around them were sheets of lottery tickets, and the vendors were shouting lucky numbers.

Nearby a boy was selling posters of Samantha Fox, Rambo, and anonymous white women stretched out on cars. All the people in advertising here are white Caucasians in western clothes, no dark flat Amer-Indian faces, no campesino shawls and sandals. Madonna's new single was blasting from every bar. The guests from the wedding got into their cars – shining Mercedes and chunky Range Rovers, guarded by soldiers in combat uniforms carrying automatic weapons. The streets were crowded with beggars and ragged men asleep on the pavements. A little girl watching everything shot out her hand to me as I passed. I dropped a coin in her mother's cup, but all the way down the street the mother called out after me in English: 'Money, money, money.'
The story of Arnoldo and Rosa.

NICARAGUA

The Nicaraguan revolution in 1979 brought land reform and major improvements in health and education. But the country is drained of resources by the US-sponsored 'Contra' war, and the US embargo on trade, aid, and loans. Since these testimonies were recorded, Nicaragua has suffered the devastating effects of Hurricane Joan, which wiped out the fishing and timber industries in the Atlantic Coast region, and left at least 300,000 people homeless.

NICARAGUA: DAVID ARCHER, a development education worker from Oxford

(visited Nicaragua in 1986)

One day, when visiting a rural area ten kilometres from Leon, I was introduced to a 15-year-old boy, Chano, who had been teaching adults to read and write for over a year. He insisted that this was quite common, but that I should really meet his sister, Mercedes, who had been only 12 when she had been a teacher during the Literacy Crusade in 1980. So we followed him down a dusty track to his home. Within an hour of entering the family house, I was invited to stay indefinitely.

The family were remarkable. In 1978 they had been forced by fear of Somoza’s National Guard to leave their small home in Leon, and move to the countryside with their five children. They became landless peasants, living in a single-roomed house with grandparents. The nearest water was two miles away.

Only after the revolution did things change. With the redistribution of land, they received four fields on which they could freely plant crops to eat and sell in the market. The following year they got a loan to build a house on their land, and soon after, another loan to dig a well. A new health centre was opened a mile away, and a school with six classrooms was built in 1983. Then, incredibly, President Ortega himself came to the community on his weekly 'Face The People' television programme. Arnoldo, the father of the family, argued that the area needed electricity – and two months later, sure enough, electricity was connected. Their house now has a fridge and a small television, which has turned their lounge into a free local cinema.

This family’s life has been transformed, and they are not untypical. They now have a flourishing farm; Arnoldo works as a carpenter, and Rosa, his wife, helps with a sewing cooperative. The children are healthy and all attend school regularly.

(from the OXFORD Testimony)
The thing that really struck me about Nicaragua was that everybody really wanted to learn. Someone described the country as a giant school, and the secondary school at Corinto certainly illustrates that.

At 7 o’clock in the morning the first group of students goes in to the school. They have lessons till 1 o’clock. At 2 o’clock another group comes, and they have lessons till 7 p.m. They go away, and then till 9 p.m. there are other classes, or parents’ meetings. So this small building is constantly used.

The classrooms are completely open: when it rains, the rain comes in. There is just a blackboard and a few chairs. There was nothing in the science lab. Despite the fact that Nicaragua’s education programme is very ambitious, and far ahead of education policy in this country, they couldn’t carry out their plans, because they just didn’t have the equipment. The pipes that were there to provide gas for the labs were just sticking out of the floor, so the practical lessons that the students should have had just weren’t possible.

Ever since the USA imposed its economic blockade, it has been almost impossible to get replacement equipment. So the roof can’t be repaired, and there was only one fluorescent strip light. It gets dark about six in the evening in Nicaragua. In the Corinto school the students all gather together under one light to learn to read and write. I was amazed at their determination. Most people would just give up if they had to contend with those sorts of problems. And everywhere you go you see children in the streets with their bags and books. I saw a monument of an angel, with children sitting underneath it doing their homework, and obviously enjoying what they were doing. They had such enthusiasm.

(from the LIVERPOOL Testimony)
My particular interest is in agricultural engineering. I visited a project ten miles south of Esteli. I went there on a motorbike, borrowed from a local policeman: I'd helped him to repair it, and he lent it to me for the day, to visit Madindra. The project was set up by the Ministry of Agrarian Reform on about ten acres of land. There's a woodwork shop and a metalwork shop, and living accommodation. The projects included things like windmill water pumps, windmill electricity generation, and a scheme to design a simple, strong, cheap and reliable ox-cart. They also had a small bio-gas plant, a pilot plant for bio-gas units being installed all over Nicaragua now. They use human and animal excrement to generate methane gas, and store it in a large cylinder.

This is the only high-tech part of the operation: you have to have a metal storage cylinder. But they had a lot of trouble because they couldn't get abrasive materials for metalworking, or sandpaper. They couldn't get emery stones to sharpen their lathe tools. So when I was there the workshops were at a standstill, because of the American trade embargo. It's little things like that which stop big projects.

(from the CAMBRIDGE Testimony)
NICARAGUA: CHRISTEEN WINFORD, a film maker from Edinburgh

(visited Nicaragua in 1986)

I went up north to film at the La Dalia Health Centre. Scottish Medical Aid is raising money to build a proper Health Centre there. There was just a hut, where a few doctors and nurses were struggling to provide for the health needs of 50,000 people, scattered over a wide area. The community they served before was 5,000, but over a year that had increased tenfold, because of refugees fleeing from the Contra forces. I was horrified to be told that the Contra had sent out death threats to health workers. It was difficult to get health workers to go into the outlying communities, because the Contra had specifically warned that if they caught anyone vaccinating children, they would kill them. As a result, there was a measles epidemic from which children had died. Measles had been almost eradicated from Nicaragua after the revolution in 1979.

(from the EDINBURGH Testimony)
I used to think that I couldn't do anything to help the people of Nicaragua, because I wasn't a doctor or a nurse. But then I learned about the international coffee brigades, and I thought, "Well, I could pick coffee." So I got six weeks' leave from my place of work, and went to help bring in the coffee harvest in the Matagalpa region.

I found that the economy of Nicaragua is collapsing. It affects everybody in the country, particularly the peasant families in the mountains. Their diet is very basic, just rice and beans for every meal. The peasants work in the coffee fields without protective clothing in the rainy season, and they don't have proper footwear – just flimsy sandals in the mud.

We managed to get the harvest in, despite the bad weather, but the problem was transporting it: getting it down to the processing plants when the lorries had no spare parts, and electricity supplies were disrupted – the Contras were blowing the pylons up.

While I was picking coffee a sharp branch went into my eye and damaged the cornea a little. I went to Matagalpa hospital for treatment. It is a modern hospital, built after the revolution, with excellent facilities. But they couldn't use the X-ray equipment, because they couldn't get spare parts. Everything is in short supply. There's no such thing as disposable gloves. Everything is used again and again.

People said to me, "When you get back to your country, let people know what's happening here. Ask people to put pressure on your government to persuade the Americans to stop hurting us . . . Tell the world what's happening here."

(from the LIVERPOOL Testimony)
Central America Week takes place in Britain and Ireland each year around the anniversary of the death of Archbishop Oscar Romero. A friend of the poor and powerless, he was assassinated at his altar in San Salvador on 24 March 1980.

Central America Week brings together a wide range of people, united by their concern for peace and justice in the region. In more than 100 towns, local people organise church services, cultural events, lobbying, and fundraising.

Not everyone can personally visit the region, unlike the contributors to this booklet. But we can all do something in our own communities to support the people of Central America who are striving for an alternative to poverty and terror.

For more information, contact Central America Week, 82 Margaret Street, London W1N 8LH (tel. 01 631 5173).

“We can all do something.”
– Archbishop Romero