

# THE GENESIS OF DEATH SQUADS

**Louise Zwick, Mark Zwick**

*[From Vietnam to El Salvador, to Chile, to so many other Latin American countries, and now Iraq, a pattern of death squads in which the US has been involved is emerging.]*

Our exposure o death squads began some years ago while attending the Center for Community Psychiatry.

We attended a special workshop in which a psychologist presented a case study of one of his patients, recently returned from Vietnam, and was interested in the response of other therapists.

The patient's story was apparently a figment of his imagination, wherein he described one incident after another, where he supposedly murdered anyone who may have possibly been sympathetic to the Vietcong. He was assigned to kill non-combatants.

A number of therapists gave their opinions and it was left at that. Not long after this we learned about the use of death squads in Vietnam, which fit the 'fiction' perfectly as described by the so-called mental patient.

## **SALVADORAN DEATH SQUADS**

We moved to El Salvador with our two young children before the beginning of the Civil War.

Things became a bit hairy for us as the priest who had invited us to live and work in his parish was arrested and held overnight where he was mistreated in order to frighten him to halt sending letters to the editors of US newspapers exposing the poverty of El Salvador and the increasing repression against its people. He could not bring himself to stop this, so he was soon deported.

We encountered the famous *Guardia* on several occasions. They retained us at gunpoint, taking us away from the market to the country to interrogate us, where there were no witnesses, just them, their big guns, and us.

We were sent by our pastor (before he was deported) to take pictures of the Mass celebrated to protest the deportation of a Colombian priest, Fr. Bernal. As we walked to the church, we noticed brand new cars with pistols in the seats.

To whom did these guns belong? Before Mass began, we noticed a priest walking up and down, rather agitated. It was Rutilio Grande, SJ.

It was at this Mass that Fr. Rutilio gave his famous sermon in which he said that Jesus would be arrested as a subversive if he were in El Salvador. In addition, he said, the Bible would not be accepted.

Shortly after the Mass protesting the deportation of Fr. Bernal, Fr. Rutilio and two church workers were killed.

The government said they would investigate. Clear to all was the role of the death squads.

We just missed being killed by the death squads when we made a retreat with other members of our *comunidad de base* (base community). In the retreat immediately following ours, death squads entered and killed Fr. Navarro and retreatants.

Archbishop Oscar Romero, who became Archbishop shortly after we arrived in El Salvador, defended the priests and lay people who were picked up and arrested, going on the radio to announce their disappearance and going to the police and the jails to try to have them released before they disappeared. Archbishop Romero was himself later killed by the death squads after begging all to lay down their arms.

The same death squads killed the Jesuits and their co-workers.

The vehemence of protests against the School of the Americas\* makes sense when one reflects on the training that takes place there for participants in death squads. Making lists of civilians who disagree and targeting them for assassination cannot be justified by any just war theory.

### **DEATH SQUADS IN IRAQ**

In January 2005 there were many articles in the US press, beginning with *Newsweek* magazine, describing extensive talks within the Bush administration about using the 'Salvador option' in Iraq. While most tele-vision news has continued to cloak discussions of so much killing in Iraq in implications of 'those Arabs with terrorist tendencies', and call it 'civil war', other reporters are documenting the pattern of death squads where the US has been involved, from Vietnam to El Salvador, to Chile, to so many other Latin American countries, and now Iraq.

Articles are beginning to appear with such titles as, 'For Iraq, the Salvador Option Becomes Reality', 'Death Squad Democracy', 'Most of the Corpses in Baghdad's Mortuary Show Signs of Torture', and 'Our Monsters in Iraq'. In March 2006 several publications published the report of the UN human rights official in Iraq of death threats against the director of the Baghdad Morgue after he reported that more than 7,000 people had been killed by death squads in recent months. He had to flee the country.

In March this year *The Guardian* quoted John Pace, the UN official, on the situation at the morgue: 'The vast majority of bodies showed signs of summary execution - many with their hands tied behind their back. Some showed evidence of torture, with arms and leg joints broken by electric drills.'—*Third World Network Features*

*[The School of the Americas (SOA) is a US Army training school that trains soldiers and military personnel from Latin American countries in subjects like counter-insurgency, military intelligence and counter-narcotics operations. After an embarrassing public release of its 'torture training manuals' in 1996, the School instituted a public relations campaign to attempt to prove they made changes. The SOA was 'closed' in December 2000 and 'reopened' in January 2001 with a new name, the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC). However, a side-by-side comparison between the 'old' school and the 'new' school shows that the changes are almost entirely cosmetic, and critics of the SOA concur that WHINSEC is just a continuation of the SOA. SOA/WHINSEC graduates have included some of the worst and most notorious human rights abusers in Latin American history and for much of the world, the School, under any name, is synonymous with torture and impunity. In total, the School has produced at least 11 Latin American dictators.] (From: School of the Americas Watch, <http://www.soaw.org>)* ✍

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