



Rebuilding in El Salvador

By Thomas Long

SAN MARCOS LEMPA, EL SALVADOR

Traffic down the coastal highway stops abruptly at the Lempa River, as cars and trucks from both directions alternate in crossing a rickety one-lane bridge. Rising high alongside is a modern, mechanized bridge being built by the Japanese. Down below, jutting out of the river and twisting along its banks, are the rusted skeletal remains of the Puente de Oro, the "Bridge of Gold." The once-glorious 400-meter suspension bridge was vivid testimony of the ambitious infrastructure projects of military dictatorships since the '40s—and later to the brutal civil war that raged throughout the '80s. It was here that leftist guerrillas struck their first grand blow against the regime, with a spectacular series of detonations that wrenched and toppled the symbol of military government on Oct. 15, 1981.

Nearly 20 years later, the reconstruction of the bridge, and of the lives of thousands of peasant farmers, former guerrilla fighters and ex-army soldiers who have relocated nearby, evokes the past while pointing toward an uncertain future.

With the end of the war in 1992, groups of rebel fighters and their civilian supporters moved into the area to begin new lives. As part of the peace accords, the government finally was obliged to give peasants, combatants and refugees legal title to the agrarian-reform land that was



such a powerful emotional symbol of the conflict.

Not entirely pleased with the arrangement, the right-wing government of then-President Alfredo Cristiani, dominated by wealthy landowners and military officers, sent hundreds of ex-soldiers and their families to take plots in the midst of the leftist refugees. This was done at least partly in the hope that the two groups would continue in conflict. In the beginning, Cristiani's plan seemed to be working. "For the first year or two, they would put up posts and we'd cut them down; we'd put up fences and they'd tear them down, it was rather absurd," recalls Jorge Villatoro, a steadfast member of the Farabundo Marti National

Liberation Front (FMLN), who is also the chief coordinator of 65 communities in the Lower Lempa.

But soon the new residents came to realize how much they had in common: Both sides had been foot soldiers—in many cases cannon fodder—during the war, and both were left to fend for themselves afterward. Soon enough, they came to see the need to organize for mutual benefit.

Luis Ramos spent 20 years in what he vaguely refers to as "territorial service" for the army. Not a regular soldier, he won't say what his duties were, possibly recruiting, possibly intelligence—or worse. His attitudes today are indicative of the flux of social and political ideas during the postwar period. "I always saw the leftists as terrorists, I said I would never sit and talk with any of them, never," says Ramos, who is now on the coordinating committee, which effectively serves as the local government.

Without the distorting filter of wartime hatred, Ramos slowly began to see the level of corruption and fraud in recent governments, and the failure to govern responsibly, or even at all, in areas like the Lower Lempa. "It sounds strange, but now I feel I'm more

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Above: A reforestation project. Left: A meeting of the coordinating committee that serves as the local government. Page 29: A boy casts his line as part of a fishing project.