

The Saviour & The Sword

EL SALVADOR, a small country in Central America, has for years been a big headache for the United States whose presidents have been torn by a classic dilemma: should they bolster a repressive right-wing military regime or leave it to be toppled by left-wing guerrillas? To support the ruling regime in El Salvador could have the US embroiled in a new Vietnam; to keep out could see another Cuba established on her doorstep.

Since the mid-1970s, fighting between El Salvador's National Guard and the guerrillas has increased in ferocity with the peasant population suffering heavily in the crossfire. According to recent reports, the country is now in the grip of a new reign of terror in which over 1,000 people a month have been killed during the last two years.

As with so many of the world's trouble-spots, the festering

canker that underlies the conflict in El Salvador is the grossly inequitable pattern of land ownership which produces an enormous contrast in the living conditions of rich and poor. The figures speak for themselves: two per cent of the 4.5 million population, including the dominant Fourteen Families, own 60 per cent of the land; six families alone hold more land than 133,000 small farms.

Two years ago, in an attempt to head off further bloodshed, the ruling junta announced a programme of land reform. The progress made so far is reviewed in a recent report by Oxfam America. In this article, FRED FOLDVARY, who lived for some years in Central America, examines the reform proposals and, in the light of the report, considers how effective they are likely to be in restoring peace and stability to El Salvador.

THE CURRENT problems of El Salvador, in common with those of many Latin American countries, can be traced back to the Spanish conquest when the *conquistadores* established a feudal economic system under which land-owning oligarchies descended from the Spaniards ruled over populations of native Indians and mestizo (mixed blood) peasants. In El Salvador, the peasants survived on their tribal lands, on *ejidos* or public lands as well as on church lands that had been granted by the Spanish crown.

This uneasy stability received a violent jolt in 1881 when the oligarchy, scenting the lucrative prospects of a new agrarian industry, abolished the peasants' rights to the common lands and forced thousands of villagers off the fertile central highlands in order to establish coffee plantations. Those peasants lucky enough to end up owning any land at all were confined to small plots yielding them a bare subsistence in basic food crops. Those who could obtain land only by renting it were required to work part-time on their landlords' plantations. For the landless, labouring work on the plantations was virtually the only means of livelihood.

After the great crash of 1929, the coffee market collapsed and the sharp increase in poverty, especially among the landless, led to a mass uprising in 1932 which was brutally crushed. Thousands of peasants – perhaps as many as 30,000 – were massacred.

The past 20 years, with population increasing and labourers progressively displaced by machines, have seen a big build-up in the number of landless workers. The landless now number 65 per cent of the population, and the seething unrest has reached a new peak.

Reacting to this and to pressures from the US government, the ruling junta, in March 1980, announced a Basic Agrarian Reform Law. The



El Salvador Land Reform 1980-81, by Laurence Simon and James Stephens Jr., Boston: Oxfam America, \$3.50.

reform was to take place in three stages:

Phase I was to appropriate estates of 500 hectares or larger and to establish peasant co-operatives to run them. Owners, who would be allowed to retain the legal limit of 100-500 hectares, were to get compensation in government bonds.

Phase II was to take over estates of 150 to 500 hectares, again with peasant co-operatives being formed to run them. Compensation was to be paid partly in cash and partly in government bonds.

Phase III, known as the "Land to the Tiller" programme, was to take over those lands, regardless of size, which were not being directly cultivated by the owners and hand them over to the tenants. No one was to receive more than 7 hectares. To get full title to their newly-acquired land, the tenants would have to stay on their plots for 30 years and, during this time, make payments to the government to help cover the cost of the reform.

Any hopes that the reform programme would usher in a new dawn in the nation's affairs were soon dashed. Passing a law is one thing; setting up the administration to ensure its enforcement is another. The law was full of inconsistencies,

ambiguities and contradictions, and wealthy landowners affected by Phase I soon found loopholes enabling them to escape its provisions. The 150 hectares they were allowed to retain could, of course, be the most valuable parts of the land. The rest, by use of subterfuge, might be subdivided among relatives.

Then there was bribery. This could ensure, for example, that coffee-processing plants were classified as "urban" and thus excluded from the take-over. In the last resort, movable assets could be moved out and, indeed, vast quantities of machinery and livestock have been transported across the Guatemala border. Some 30 per cent of the livestock has been destroyed.

ALONGSIDE all the evasion, the climate of insecurity in the country has further loaded the dice against the reform. With a repressive military regime, most peasants go in fear of the soldiers who frequently make no distinction between the peasants and the guerrillas.

The Oxfam report states that, from the announcement of the land reform, the violence against the peasants sharply increased. Yet to the Army falls the task of implementing the new law. Small wonder that peasants tend to flee whenever the soldiers appear. It is probably no coincidence that the area of the country where there should be the biggest number of beneficiaries under the reform law (the 160,000 who should benefit from Phase III) is the area of the most brutal repression. There is no doubt that the initial hopes of many peasants have been rudely dashed, so leading to further turmoil and insecurity in the countryside.

But even more significant in the public's reaction to the reform law is the amazing fact that the *landless* peasants, who form 60 per cent of the rural population, do not benefit from

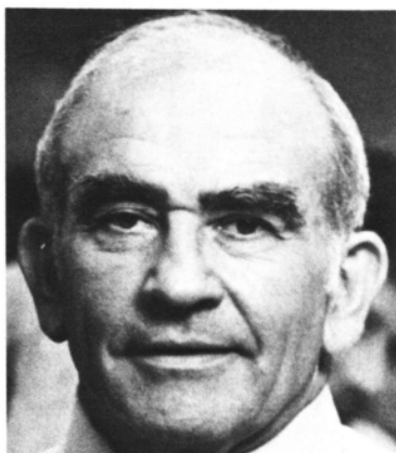
it at all. Under the law, the co-operatives are to be formed by the permanent employees of the estates (the managers, office workers, tractor drivers and *resident* labourers). The temporary labourers and the rest of the landless are excluded. For them, land reform passes by on the other side of the street.

Although Phases I and III are theoretically in operation, no go-ahead for Phase II has yet been given. It affects some of El Salvador's best land and involves eight times as many properties as Phase I; it takes in 23 per cent of the country's farmland on which is produced 70 per cent of the coffee crop.

The main reason for the hold-up over Phase II is not far to seek: the support of Phase II landowners is a vital factor in the survival of the ruling junta. Moreover, on these medium-sized farms there are few knowledgeable employees capable of forming co-operatives. To put Phase II into operation would require considerable government planning and administrative expenditure – all most unlikely in the present political state of the country.

So although many of the Phase II owners are preparing for the possible D-day by curtailing production and selling off parts of their properties, the general guess is that the legislation activating Phase II will merely gather dust in the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock.

Phase II (Land to the Tiller) has also stirred up widespread opposition and resentment. Since the measure was announced, many landowners have taken steps to evict their tenants. This is almost certainly illegal but, here again, the law is ambiguous and the owners are confident that it will never be enforced.



● ED ASNER

On the other side of the coin, the requirement for newly-acquired plots to be held for 30 years is opposed by the peasants who abhor its rigidity and the fact that it does not allow for the plot rotation that is traditional in El Salvador. Moreover, it affects all rented plots even though, in many cases, the owners are as poor as their tenants. Any poor owner who has rented out a two-hectare plot to an even poorer relative is now in danger of losing it. Many such tenants have declared that they could not bring themselves to claim such land and so deprive the owner of his only income.

THE OXFAM report sees "Land to the Tiller" as essentially a political expedient adopted, not to conform to the agricultural needs of El Salvador's people but as an attempt to generate popular support for a faltering regime. The general expectation is that, with its multitude of defects and shortcomings making it unworkable, "Land to the Tiller" will die a natural death in a few months.

HOLLYWOOD actor Ed Asner – news editor Lou Grant in the award-winning TV series about newspapermen – is in hot water with Big Screen tough guy Charlton Heston.

Asner, who is president of the Screen Actors' Guild, recently made what Heston regarded as a controversial remark about US involvement in El Salvador.

On a visit to Washington to present a \$25,000 cheque for medical aid in the Central American country, Asner declared:

"I'm trying to get this country to stop its participation in the defeat of El Salvador or change its age-old non-attention to the problems of Central America, which are true land reform and true democratic practices."

For this, Heston – supported by James Stewart and Clint Eastwood – attacked Asner in a slanging match.

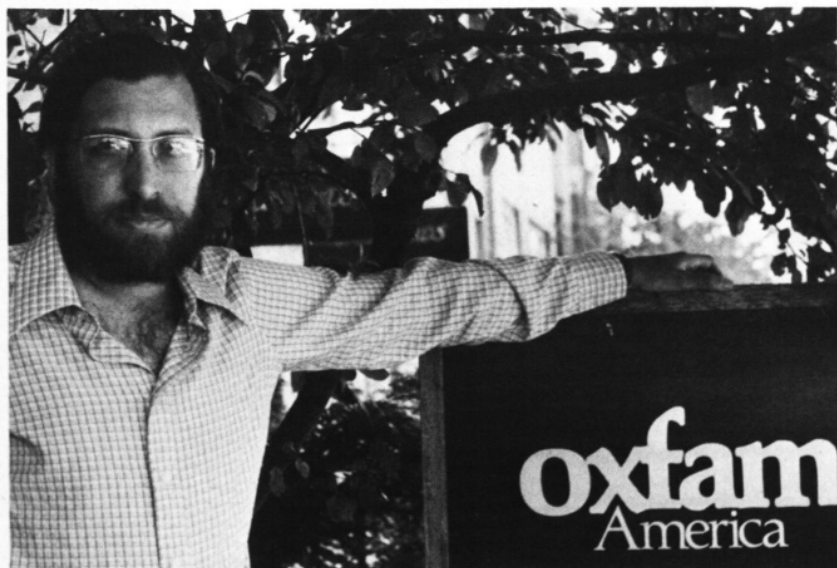
The present state of the land reform programme as a whole is that nothing effectively has been accomplished since the law was passed two years ago. No titles have been re-distributed and very few tenants have ceased renting their land. Even before it has properly begun, the programme is in a state of near-collapse.

The El Salvador experience clearly demonstrates the futility of attempting to remedy injustice in land ownership by physically re-distributing the land. Even if it were practicable to divide the land fairly between the whole of the present population – setting aside the economic problems of fragmentation – this would leave nothing for those yet unborn – those who will appear in future national statistics as "population increases".

But in El Salvador there is not even the semblance of an equitable re-distribution among the present population. Nearly two-thirds of the people are mere spectators of the present charade, while those who do participate may end up with holdings varying between 150 hectares for the wealthy down to a mere allotment-size plot for the poor.

The lesson of El Salvador is that, to be effective and equitable, land reform must avoid the physical appropriations and artificial constraints contained in the junta's programme. *The only practical way is to concentrate, not on the land itself, but on the economic rent. Taking this for the benefit of all the people by levying a tax on land values would at once restore the people's rights and eliminate completely the basis of the privilege enjoyed by the oligarchy.*

Only when the revolutionaries, the military and the politicians recognise this will peace, stability and economic justice return to this war-torn country ironically named The Saviour.



● Laurence Simon outside Oxfam America's HQ in Boston, Mass.