

El Salvador lives on hope

SAN SALVADOR — In lovely, downtown San Salvador you have a choice of two good hotels. A diplomat asked me which one I had picked. The Camino Real, I replied, where all red-blooded journalists camp.

"Well, I guess that's the better choice," he observed. "The Camino gets rocketed fairly frequently but then they say the El Presidente is right on top of a fault zone and will collapse when the next quake hits us."

San Salvador, capital of El Salvador, is not the place for a honeymoon. For the past decade El Salvador has been torn by a very ugly civil war in which more than 70,000 have died. Every morning brings a new collection of bullet-riddled bodies in the streets. Car bombs go off the growing frequency. One rattled the windows of my room. Late at night you hear gunfire from different parts of the city, which is nestled in a valley surrounded by arid mountains.

Just as I arrived, Marxist rebels, known by the acronym FMLN, had blown up 60% of the nation's electrical generating capacity. The lights in the hotel were flickering on and off. My last night, there was no electricity at all. I wrote in my room by romantic candlelight, listening to explosions and light weapons fire from the distant hills to the west.

At one extreme are the 6,000 armed guerillas of the FMLN, a leftist coalition that runs from socialists to Castro-Stalinists. It's backed by Cuba, Nicaragua and, indirectly, by the USSR. In El Salvador, the FMLN can count on about 100,000 civilian supporters. Some members of the FMLN talk about social democracy and free elections. The hard core, however, wants to turn El Salvador into another Cuba or Nicaragua. History shows that when you put social democrats and communists in the same dark room, only the latter emerge alive.

At the other extreme are the 60,000-man army and police, backed by the right-wing Arena party. In worse old days, the army used to keep order for the 11 big families who owned all of El Salvador. Now, after a major but still incomplete land reform program, perhaps 25% of the peasantry and all of the middle class have come to share at least some of the nation's wealth. But the

Punch



"Quiet! I hear 10 — no, 15 — corporate raiders approaching."

ERIC MARGOLIS



FMLN wants revolution, not evolution.

The FMLN ambushes army and police units and is busy wrecking the nation's infrastructure, such as bridges and telecommunications. Its assassination squads murder mayors, teachers and anyone representing the government.

You don't hear too much about these communist death squads. But by now almost everyone has heard agonizing tales of right-wing death squads that have been busy murdering communists and their sympathizers — including a goodly number of Marxist priests and nuns. It's a dirty, no-prisoners war between left and right.

To many Salvadoreans the choice is "either Fidel or Arena." Caught smack in the middle is the feeble democratic government of poor Jose Napoleon Duarte. He is now dying of liver cancer. The U.S. has poured \$3.6 billion into El Salvador in a major effort to build up a democratic government and develop this terribly poor nation. Trying to cultivate the delicate flower of democracy in the middle of an eye-gouging civil war has, not surprisingly, failed.

Added to these problems is the fact tiny El Salvador, only 8,000 square miles, is Central America's most densely populated nation. It already has more than 4.5 million people and the population is growing by 3.2% annually. The civil war has been about who will control the nation's rich farmland. Where, I wondered, will land be found for all the new people? Some solution must be found to stop the mayhem. Complex negotiations are now afoot between the government, army, Arena and the FMLN. The army has just called for a ceasefire and the FMLN is hinting that it may lay down its arms and join national elections.

Suddenly, amid the bombs and bloodied bodies, there's hope that the stalemated civil war might be ended. Even the right-wing Arena party, which leads in the polls, is moving to the centre and has agreed to share power with the left — though how much remains a question.

Ending the civil war will be exceptionally difficult. It's awfully dangerous to disarm in front of people who have been trying to kill you and your family for a decade. Suppose the FMLN come down from the mountains and were rounded up and shot by the army? Suppose Nicaragua invades if the army lays down its arms? Or suppose the FMLN stages a coup once it is sharing power?

While the talk goes on, the bombs and murders do, too. Most everyone here still packs a gun or automatic rifle. Lots of thinly disguised CIA men are highly visible. So are squads of foreign reporters whose Jeeps sport large signs saying, "Don't Shoot — Journalists." It's the wild west.

Maybe that's why the stewardess on my inbound flight crossed herself twice before we landed.