

El Salvador on our minds--and in photos

The heartache we have endured in our state this month gives us a small glimpse at the day to day lives of our brothers and sisters in the neighborhood of Berlin, El Salvador. As we prepare to send a delegation to Berlin in July, please consider the years of struggle they have endured. Some of their history is told in a photography exhibit in Austin Texas through August 3.

The Harry Ransom Center at The University of Texas at Austin hosts "Inside El Salvador," a photography exhibition of more than 100 black-and-white images concerning the country's civil war and its aftermath.

After 50 years of military dictatorship in El Salvador, a coup d'etat in 1979 ignited a 12-year civil war that became notorious for assassinations, disappearances and death squads.

Christian-based communities, unions, student and popular organizations became targets for joining in opposition to the government, and civilian non-combatants were often caught in the crossfire between the military and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), an umbrella group of four guerrilla organizations and the Communist Party.

After UN-brokered peace accords were signed in 1992, about 80,000 people had been killed (most of them civilians) and as many as 1.5 million people had fled the country. While the peace accords ended the armed conflict, they did not directly address issues such as poverty, health, safety and education. The Salvadoran economy grew significantly in the decade following the war, but today the perpetuation of social ills has brought about a new kind of bloodshed: homicide rates are as high or higher than during the war and street gangs are widespread.

The first section of the exhibition is made up of 67 images taken by 30 international photojournalists during the intensely brutal period of conflict between 1979 and 1983. Photographers Susan Meiselas and Harry Mattison gathered these images into a traveling exhibition and book in 1983 to raise global awareness about the conflict.

The exhibition continues with images taken by award-winning documentary photographer Donna DeCesare,.. This section, called "El Salvador Inside Out," begins by covering the end of the civil war, notably the murder of six Jesuit priests and the guerilla offensive in San Salvador in 1989—events that increased international pressure for the peace accords.

The Ransom Center's exhibition is in conjunction with "Image, Memory and the Paradox of Peace: Fifteen Years after the El Salvador Peace Accords," a conference hosted by The University of Texas at Austin's Rapoport Center for Human Rights and Justice, the Lozano Long Institute for Latin American Studies, the School of Journalism and the Rothko Chapel in Houston.