

# EL SALVADOR

Team members Silvana Turner and Mercedes Doretti traveled to El Salvador from August 18 through September 6, 2002 to assess what work remained to be completed in EAAF's long-standing forensic investigation of the El Mozote massacre. While there, at the request of Tutela Legal, the human rights office of the Archbishop of San Salvador, they also conducted a preliminary investigation of a recently-come-to-light massacre site called El Barrío. Both massacres occurred during El Salvador's twelve-year civil war.

This mission was funded by the Open Society in New York, which also made it possible for the photographer Pedro Linger Gasiglia to provide photographic documentation of the work carried out.

## BACKGROUND : The Massacre of El Mozote

Between the 6th and 16th of December, 1981, the Salvadoran armed forces began a major offensive, "Operation Rescue," in the province of Morazán, located in the northeastern region of El Salvador. The operation, led by the elite US-trained Atlacatl counterinsurgency battalion,



was intended to kill or force guerilla troops from the area, destroy their clandestine radio station, and eliminate any support for them among the civilian population.

After the massacre of many of the inhabitants of El Mozote and the burning of their houses, the army established a base there, and over the next few days conducted daytime attacks on the nearby villages of La Joya, Jocote Amarillo,



**Antonia Diaz [left] spinning thread, is one of the survivors of the Mozote massacre from the Cerro Pando hamlet. She is giving testimony about the massacre to S. Turner and M. Doretti from EAAF. Photo courtesy of Pedro Linger Gasiglia.**

Ranchería, Los Toriles, and Cerro Pando. In each village, the troops massacred the residents they encountered, burned their houses and fields, and slaughtered the livestock. The army remained in the area for two weeks.

While the troops returned to their temporary camps at El

Mozote each evening, the surviving residents returned to the massacre sites under the cover of darkness to inter as many of the victims as possible in common graves close to where the bodies were found. For their safety, however, they could not bury many bodies, and these remained lying at the sites where they had been killed.



**From left, Wilfredo Medrano, lawyer with Tutela Legal and M. Doretti of EAAF, with two survivors of El Barrío at the site of the massacre. Photo by Pedro Linger Gasiqña.**

Most of the survivors escaped across the Honduran border to UN refugee camps, others joined the guerrilla front (*Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional*, FMLN) or took refuge in other regions of El Salvador. The villages remained largely abandoned until 1989, when survivors began to return. El Mozote itself remained almost deserted until several years later.

### *The Investigation of the Massacre*

Unlike other massacres, the events at El Mozote were documented by survivors, rebel forces and the international press and made public, at least to the international community, at the time. Only weeks after the incident, Alma Guillermoprieto, Raymond Bonner and photojournalist Susan Meiselas traveled to the area, interviewed survivors and took photographs, publishing accounts in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* on January 27, 1982. Despite this documentation, both the Salvadoran government and the US State Department — the U.S. strongly supported the Salvadoran government throughout the war — stated that while there had been a military operation in the area, what had occurred in El Mozote had really been a “shoot-out” between the Salvadoran army and guerilla troops. Since there was no evidence of such a massacre, they claimed reports of it

must be guerilla propaganda.<sup>i</sup> Both governments’ refusal to support further investigations into the incident succeeded in removing it from public attention in El Salvador and the US for several years.

Human rights groups from Morazán however, continued to press for a thorough investigation of the event. In 1989, at the request of these groups, Tutela Legal began an extensive investigation into the massacre. In October 1990, Tutela Legal helped several survivors of the massacre initiate a legal suit against the army in the court in San Francisco Gotera, capital of Morazán.

As part of this investigation, Tutela Legal contacted EAAF in 1991 and requested assistance in the investigation. In 1992, at Tutela’s request, EAAF worked as expert witnesses to the case brought by survivors and as technical consultants to the UN Truth Commission<sup>ii</sup>. Since 1999, also at the request of Tutela, EAAF has conducted annual missions and members have served as expert witnesses for the judicial proceedings in Gotera. During the missions, team members and expert consultants have worked to exhume and identify many of the victims of this massacre. However, no prosecutions have yet to take place due to the application of an amnesty law.<sup>iii</sup>

### *Planning the Termination of Forensic Investigations in El Mozote*

During previous missions, EAAF has recovered the remains of a minimum of 217 individuals killed in this massacre from mass graves located in the hamlets of El Mozote, La Joya, Jocote Amarillo and Los Toriles. Based on new historical, forensic, and other data collected on this census mission to El Mozote and five other hamlets, EAAF ascertained where final exhumations would be carried out and where people might have been when the massacres occurred. In Rancheria, we expect to recover the remains of anywhere from twenty-five to forty people who were buried by relatives shortly after the massacre. In El Mozote, we anticipate locating the remains of twenty to forty people who were killed in their houses and later buried by FMLN medical brigades. We anticipate carrying out exhumations in other hamlets, including Cerro Pando, where there are

**Table 1. Distribution of El Barrío reported victims by sex and age**

	0-12	13-20	21-35	35-50	≥ 50	Total
<b>Female</b>	12	05	05	01	01	24
<b>Male</b>	14	01	04	01	05	25
<b>Total</b>	26	06	09	02	06	49

two mass graves containing the remains of nine individuals, in Cerro Las Piedras, where two individual graves are located, and in Quebrada Los Lolos and La Chumpa, where we have identified one individual grave in each.

These gravesites are located in and around the hamlets, and in certain cases, in the yards and gardens of houses, some of which are currently occupied. In cases where individuals were buried by relatives or friends, this usually occurred within several days of the massacre. The FMLN medical brigade buried remains some three to four weeks after the massacre and by this time, they were quite decomposed, mostly skeletonized, and had been disturbed by animals. For this reason, they are much more difficult to identify.

In 2002, EAAF interviewed witnesses, survivors and people involved in burying the remains of the dead in these last graves. In addition, in interviews conducted with families during the mission, we ascertained which families had reached consensus with regard to exhumations. In certain cases, families are divided on the issue of whether the remains should be exhumed. For instance, in the case of five mass graves located in La Joya and containing the remains of approximately forty individuals, some relatives felt strongly that the gravesite should remain undisturbed. This kind of situation most often occurs in relation to evangelical religious beliefs or in cases of family feuds. As a rule, EAAF will not proceed with exhumations in such cases.

The exhumed remains will be analyzed in the laboratory to determine the cause(s) of death and the identities of the victims when possible. Once the analyses are complete, the remains will be returned to the relatives or the community for proper reburial.

### *Massacre at El Barrío*

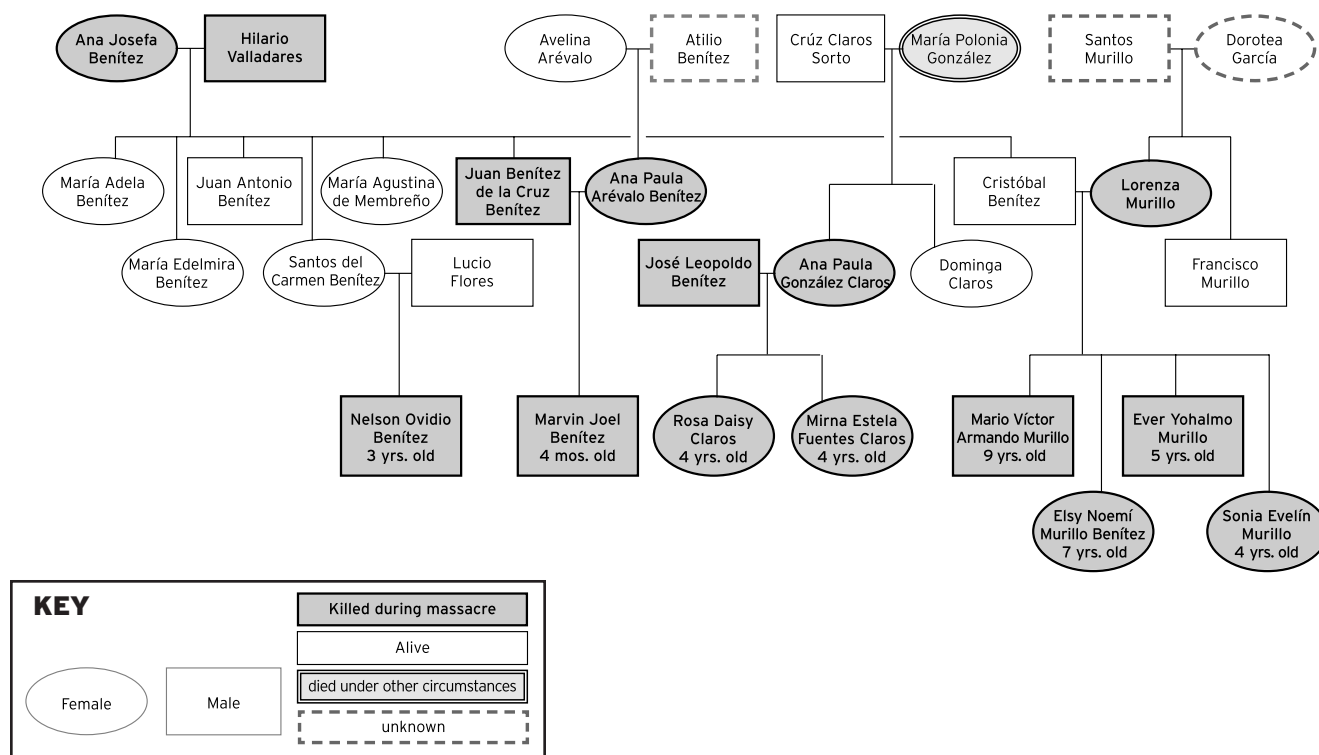
Upon EAAF's arrival in San Salvador, Maria Julia Hernandez, director of Tutela Legal, suggested that part of the team's mission be devoted to a preliminary investigation of another massacre that took place at El Barrío, also in the province of Morazán, on April 18, 1982. This massacre had recently come to the attention of Tutela Legal when survivors requested legal representation in two newly opened cases addressing the incident in local courts.

Before departing for the city of San Francisco Gotera in the department of Morazán, where much of the rest of the mission transpired, Turner and Doretti examined case materials collected by Tutela Legal related to the massacre at El Barrío. During their stay in Gotera, they were assisted by Wilfredo Medrano, the Tutela Legal lawyer in charge of this case.

During this mission, EAAF interviewed approximately forty relatives of victims, survivors, witnesses, and people who buried the remains on the day of the massacre. The objective was to reconstruct an account of what happened, establish a list of victims and pre-mortem data on them, and establish where the mass graves might be located. As part of this work, we talked with local dental technicians who had excellent recall of the work they had done on the victims, some of whom were their relatives. Other investigative procedures include obtaining birth certificates from corresponding municipalities, with the objective of establishing birth dates of the victims and corroborating their ages.

According to accounts collected by Tutela and EAAF, a group of rent-paying settlers who farmed land referred to as El Barrío on a farm in the hamlet of Nombre de Jesús,

## Benítez Family



Genealogical tree from El Barrio, showing how many people were killed from the same family. *Graphic by Turner-Nievas, EAAF*

jurisdiction of Divisadero, department of Morazán, was reportedly massacred on April 18, 1982. According to survivors, around five in the morning, a battalion from the Salvadoran army entered the area, forcibly removed the inhabitants from their homes, gathering them in three main groups, and brought one of them across the nearby river Seco. Five women from this group, one of them about to give birth, were allegedly separated from the group to be raped and later, executed. Their bodies were left lying on the ground. The remaining people from this first group were shot in front of a tree, where they were later found.

The second group, on the hamlet-side of the river, was reportedly executed underneath a mango tree and their bodies abandoned where they fell. A while later, as the third group was lying on the ground where they had been

ordered by the soldiers, believing that their own execution was imminent, a guerilla group entered into armed conflict with other members of the army battalion nearby, diverting the attention of the soldiers about to kill the hostages and thus permitting the escape of this group of settlers. Accounts collected by EAAF and Tutela indicate that the army left the area immediately after this conflict. Family members and neighbors from a nearby settlement buried the bodies later that same day.

Lists compiled by Tutela Legal and EAAF suggest that the graves contain the remains of forty-nine persons. During EAAF's visit to the area, in the company of survivors as well as people who buried the bodies, the team identified two possible common graves and five individual graves.

## CONCLUSIONS

With the data gathered during this census mission, EAAF will conduct two missions to El Salvador in 2003, one before the rainy season to El Barrío, and one after the rainy season, in El Mozote. In both cases, EAAF will continue to collect physical data on the victims, perform exhumations at probable sites of mass graves and analyze the remains that are exhumed, with the goal of establishing cause of death, and if possible, identification and restitution.

EAAF will also continue with the work of training local experts, many of who work at the Medical Legal Institute, by offering a training course during the first mission in 2003. The idea is to assist in launching a Forensic Anthropology Unit within the Medical Legal Institute mostly dedicated to the recovery of the remains of victims of the civil war.

While exhumations in El Mozote and El Barrío are being carried out for humanitarian reasons, the El Mozote case is currently before the Inter American Court and EAAF may be called as expert witnesses in the near future. Within El Salvador, subsequent to a Supreme Court ruling made two years ago, individual judges now decide on a case-by-case basis whether the amnesty law passed by congress in 1993 may be applied for human rights violations carried out by the military during the civil war. However, no Salvadoran judge has yet to challenge the amnesty law.

At the time of writing, the 2003 mission to El Barrío has been completed and the mission to El Mozote will begin soon. Results of the investigations in both cases will appear in EAAF's 2003 Annual Report.

### FOOTNOTES

- i. Cable sent from the US Embassy in El Salvador to the US State Department, January 31, 1982, in National Security Archives and M. Danner, *The Massacre at El Mozote*, Vintage, New York, 1993.
- ii. An amnesty law passed in 1993 was interpreted as closing the case.
- iii. For further information about the El Mozote massacre see R. Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit*, Times Books, 1984, *La Masacre de El Mozote*, Tutela Legal, 1990; *The Massacre of El Mozote. The Need to remember*, Americas Watch Report, March 4 1992, Vol.IV, No.2; M. Danner, *The Massacre at El Mozote*, Vintage, New York, 1993; *From Madness to Hope*, UN Truth Commission on El Salvador, March 1993.