

Edmonton Journal

Undemocratic U.S. foreign policy at root of misery in Central America

Mon Dec 31 2001

Page: A13

Section: Letters

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Column: Guest Column

Source: Freelance

Illustrations: Cartoon: McDonall/ (The U.S. Uncle Sam dines in elegance at a Third World table, which is actually the back of an impoverished Central American man who is crouched on his knees.)

One week after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, I flew to Honduras on behalf of Christian Peacemakers International.

This group grew out of experiences my friends and I had working with refugees from Central America at the Mennonite Centre for Newcomers. Our work convinced us that unless structural problems which cause refugees are addressed, there will be more refugees. In much of Central America these problems are unequal distribution of land, resources and income.

A friend and I went to Honduras to help the Buenos Aires agricultural co-operative improve production. The land the co-operative owns is mountainous; some of it sloped up to 60 per cent. This is the only land they can afford. The more fertile lowland is owned or controlled by U.S. interests.

While visiting another co-operative, I was told that Chiquita Banana has a monopoly on banana exports from Honduras. This monopoly rigidly controls how much Hondurans are paid for bananas they grow.

On Sept. 23, my friend and I bought bottled water from the owner of the Texaco service station in Buenos Aires. That afternoon, the peasants told us that the service station

owner had been stopped by bandits on the highway. They tried to kidnap him for a ransom. When he resisted, they shot him dead. The next day they came to Buenos Aires and shot his bodyguard.

The rigid control of the Honduran economy by structures like the banana export monopoly produces the abject poverty that leads to hijackings, kidnappings and murder. This is not lost on the peasants. Some of them see violence as the only way out of their misery. Eventually this leads to terrorism, war, and ultimately to refugees in Edmonton.

From Honduras, I flew to Port-au-Prince, the capital city of Haiti, with a population of 2 million people and an average annual income of \$300 per year. I asked my hosts to take me to Cite Soleil, a slum of 750,000. They refused. It was too dangerous.

On Oct. 1 at 8:15 a.m., while driving down the main street of Port-au-Prince, I saw a man lying on the sidewalk with a bullet hole in his left temple. He had just been shot, and sprawled where he had fallen. The body stopped the flow of people on the sidewalk, who were unwilling or afraid to step over it.

A large crowd had already gathered,

stopped like dammed water in a reservoir. When I asked my host why this man had been shot he said it might have been police terror to keep the people in line, or a deal gone bad, or he had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

In July I had visited Independence Square in Philadelphia. It symbolizes the great ideas and events that shaped U.S. democracy. The square represents the best of American idealism -- self-determination, the rule of law, human rights, representation by population, no taxation without representation and ... "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men were created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness"

The UN has recognized the genius of American democracy by designating Independence Square a World Heritage Site. Appropriately so, for people all over the world resonate to the ideals the square symbolizes.

It is the reality of a repressive and undemocratic American foreign policy running headlong into the aspirations of impoverished and disenfranchised people in the developing world that engenders hate, violence, war and terrorism. It is this conflict of American ideals with American imperialism that lies at the heart of the question, "Why do they hate us?" The ascendancy of U.S. imperialism over its idealism is one of the reasons why initiatives like Christian Peacemakers International are necessary.

This conundrum also highlights the importance of an independent Canadian foreign policy.

Internationally, Canada represents almost everything Independence Square symbolizes, without the downside of exploitation and repression that characterizes American foreign policy. Canada can, and must, continue to provide international leadership rooted in the ideals of Independence Square.

Dave Hubert is the chair of Welcome Home Community