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El Salvador, Factor 14: Conflict Resolution

El Salvador: The Fight For Freedom

El Salvador has never known a time filled with peace. The smallest country in the Americas gained its independence from Spain in 1821. During the twentieth century, military dictatorships replaced democracy. Growing tensions between the different social classes erupted into a civil war that lasted from 1980 to 1992. The war was horrifically bloody, and it never truly ended. The social injustices the rebels sought to fix were the same if not worse. The government's weak programs, meant to help the poor, never strengthened (Lakhani). Children were left parentless, or their homes were scarred beyond repair. During the Civil War, many Salvadorans emigrated to the U. S. as refugees. Great numbers of Salvadorans ended up in LA neighborhoods where they felt targeted by other groups such as African Americans and Mexicans. Gangs formed among Salvadorans as a form of "neighborhood watch"; however, these groups were not free of crime, and many of these young men were deported to El Salvador. By the time they had returned, the war had ended and they found no future for themselves. They had no identity and nothing to stand for. The government was weak and the police force was nonexistent. As a result, these young men turned to violence (Garsd). El Salvador is classified as a middle income nation; however, the majority of the population lives in poverty. The children of this social class often suffer from malnutrition, and studies have found that the amount of people living in extreme poverty is growing. El Salvador is facing new levels of food insecurity due to rising prices globally, and are exporting more than anything else (World Food Programme). The situation is continually escalating.

El Salvador's family structure is very complex. Most Salvadorans put a high value on family, which includes parents, children, aunts and uncles, cousins, and grandparents. Sometimes, families and their relatives live in the same area if not in the same house, while in urban areas families tend to be smaller. On the agricultural level, the majority of Salvadorans do not own their own land. For the most part they rent land from wealthier landowners, but they are unable to feed their families with the crops they grow. Landowners are more interested in commercial farming rather than subsistence farming. The most common crops grown in El Salvador include maize, rice, beans, coffee, sugarcane, and sorghum. Healthcare in El Salvador is very poor. Many people in poverty stricken areas don't receive health care because of high costs and poor communication. The government allocates very little money to healthcare programs, and the kind of treatment people receive reflects it. Education is also an important subject in El Salvador. Although public education is available to everyone, children of poor backgrounds commonly drop out in order to pursue work opportunities to support their families. For this reason, the most educated individuals in El Salvador belong to the upper class.

The economy in El Salvador has flat lined. Since the end of the war, it recuperated somewhat, but to the presently it has gone nowhere. Historically, El Salvador has been an agricultural nation, but more recently the focus has shifted over to industrial sectors. What is left of the agricultural field in El Salvador is mostly commercial farming. This produces issues for poor farmers since the majority of the land is owned by the small upper class. The farmers are unable to do any subsistence farming, so agriculture is slowly dwindling among a youth who can't see a future for themselves in it (Schultze-Kraft). Additionally, any programs once funded by the government to help the youth have lost support, as the escalation of violence has cost the government \$2.85 billion dollars only in 2014 (Business Insider). The main cause for this nation's trouble is the ever growing gang violence.

El Salvador reports at least thirty murders daily, within a population that is only 6.3 million (Garsd). From 2015 to 2016, the country has seen a seventy percent increase in murders (Gomez). The violence in

recent years caused 2015 to be the bloodiest since the end of the Civil War. For the most part, the brutal violence that includes shootings, beheadings, and dismemberment has been confined to urban areas, but with the spread of gangs it has also moved to the countryside (Lakhani). The main players in this unofficial war are the Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, and 18th Street. These gangs have divided the nation between them, and anyone caught in between dies. MS-13 and 18th Street constantly work against the government, but they are willing to side with whichever political party is willing to get them what they want (Garsd). The gangs are also good at spotting the government's weakness, and help members get government positions in order to make their operations easier to accomplish. The government of El Salvador knows this but refuses to reform due to their fear of losing even more power (Gomez). Due to this, the populace of El Salvador has no confidence in their leaders. They recognize that their leaders cannot or are not willing to help (Farah). The youth of El Salvador see this too.

Children in El Salvador idolize gang members, because they see them as people with something to stand for and most importantly a future. Children as young as seven to sixteen years old join with gangs, and only live to the age of thirty-five on average. Their lives aren't any more secure or pleasant than anyone else's, but they finally have a sense of family. Family is something that is increasingly lost in a nation of murders and constantly disappearing people (Garsd). That is not to say that every member of the gangs joined up willingly. Any boy who refuses to become a recruit is brutally executed. Girls as young as eleven years old are forced to cater to the gangs' every desire (Farah).

The atrocity of the crimes committed by these gangs does not end at abuse. They kill their own people, while the upper class live in a state not at all different than that from an upper middle class American. In some neighborhoods in El Salvador, if you reside in one gang's territory you cannot cross into another gang's territory without permission or else you are killed. For these reasons, many parents send their children on the dangerous journey from the only home they've ever known to the United States. Another reason the gangs use murder as a tool, is that the government is willing to promise them anything they want in order to keep the blood flow on the streets low (Farah).

Eventually in 2012, the government of El Salvador managed to agree on a peace treaty with the two major gangs of the country. The gangs promised to end the violence, and the amount of murders did go down a great amount. What the government didn't know is that the gangs would use this hiatus from war as a way to reorganize and rearm without them breathing down their neck (The Associated Press). During this "peace", the gangs sent their members to become educated in the law, accounting, and even sent them to train as soldiers in the army and members of the police force. The gangs became more professional than before, and also used the break to secure stronger cocaine deals to larger cartels, including the notorious Mexican drug chain (Farah). Not surprisingly, the truce fell apart in 2013.

The truce could have lasted for far longer. In 2014, the gangs bought their neighborhoods votes so that the FMLN party, which has been in power since the 80's, could win. In exchange, the gangs would receive money and negotiations for a longer "peace". They received neither and decided to take action. The gangs knew that murders were their best negotiation tool, and so the number of deaths have skyrocketed. Recent police investigations have discovered that El Salvador's gangs have been attempting to learn from Middle Eastern terrorist groups and Colombian guerillas (Farah). This police force has recently increased their attacks on gangs, only to be faced with stronger retaliation. Suppressing the gangs solves nothing, but it seems to make them stronger (Partlow).

The solution to this violent threat has evaded us for decades, but perhaps the answer lies in the U. S.'s own past. In the early twentieth century, the United States stepped in to free the Philippines from Spanish rule. President McKinley knew that leaving the newly freed Philippines to figure out democracy on its own would lead to grave failure, and decided that it would be in their best interest to stay in the Philippines to make sure they would follow the right path. However, the rebel forces in the Philippines

viewed the U. S. as another imperialistic threat like Spain. The guerillas fought against U. S soldiers for a long period of time, and the war seemed pointless and endless. It is then that the United States shifted its focus to rebuilding lost infrastructure in the Philippines. Instead of having large military bases, small garrisons of soldiers would live among the common people in order to gain their trust. These soldiers provided healthcare, community service, built wells, and other important necessities. As the people became pacified, the guerrillas lost their support and were easier to target. Resistance ended in the areas where small groups of soldiers had worked among the common people of the Philippines. However, the U. S. also employed negative reinforcement. If it was found that the people of a village were helping rebels, help they greatly needed would stop flowing in. Eventually the people came to realize who could actually help them in their time of need. That was not all that the United States performed. In the Philippines, the U. S. would separate the people from the rebels by transferring the rebels to various camps. In these camps, the captured rebels were treated kindly by the standards of the day, so the people had no reason to fight for them when they were not being mistreated. In addition to that, thousands of schools were founded by Americans in the Philippines. Children were taught English and this served to unify Filipinos and Americans. Once the guerrillas had surrendered, the United States created a democracy. Slowly, Filipinos were integrated into government positions, but they were constantly guided and supervised. Young Filipinos were even enlisted to serve alongside the army. This strategy proved to be successful, and was utilized in Iraq to quell the conflict there. It would have worked had the American soldiers remained to supervise the burgeoning democracy. It is for this reason that there are still American army bases in Germany and Japan (Deady).

This method is fully capable of working in El Salvador. There are plenty of nongovernmental organizations that are willing to work with the U. S. to provide aid to El Salvador. Volunteers representing the U. S. could live among the common Salvadorans and provide the help they so desperately need. Young people could be educated to learn trade skills that benefit them. Existing schools could be offered resources they require. As the people realize who can help them, the gangs will lose support and the fragile government could be reformed with American assistance. Gangs could be isolated from the populace by using curfews, requiring passes to certain areas, and blocking off certain areas. Slowly, Salvadorans could be monitored to establish a strong democracy and usher in an era of peace that the small nation of El Salvador has never seen. And even then, the U. S. would continue to provide supervision to ensure that they were on the right track.

El Salvador has never known peace. Children are suffering from lack of proper nutrients, families have been torn apart by violence, and their own government ignores them. The nation was once the jewel of the Spanish empire due to its rich soil which produced sugar cane, indigo, and coffee. Agriculture is no longer a focus. The lessons learned in the Philippines could successfully quell the gangs and establish a future for a youth that has lost hope. Change can only begin when poverty ceases to grow and the children of El Salvador recognize that there is a life outside of gangs and cartels (The Associated Press). A fundamental reason for the country's suffering is that family unity is hard to come by among the poor. Parents are often gone and children find consolation among the illusion of the gangs. Helping reinstall the family structure by ending the violence would provide a model to follow for the rest of Central America which finds itself in a similar struggle. Similar histories are found across South America, Africa, Asia, and even in parts of Europe. The strategy used by the United States in the Philippines could help relieve these nations as well. Agriculture cannot flourish where conflict exists. One can create thousands of farming methods and create revolutionary technology, but none of it can save anyone if the people of the countries who need it are being terrorized and murdered by their own. The Philippines strategy is efficient and successful if one is ready to plant the seeds of hope and protect them until they are grown.

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