

Remarks by Congressman Joe Moakley
on Moakley-Murtha Substitute on El Salvador

Tuesday, May 22, 1990

Mr. Speaker, for ten long years, the people of El Salvador have confronted the harsh realities of war and all its painful consequences. They have been forced to suffer far more than any of us in this chamber can possibly realize. And, now, they beg their leaders and they plead with us for peace.

Those of us in this chamber have had, over the years, heated debates on the issue of United States policies in Central America -- and today is no exception. But I believe it is important to recognize that there are new attitudes and actions by the Bush Administration and Members of both parties to achieve common ground and a bipartisan policy towards dealing with El Salvador.

I commend Secretary of State Baker and Assistant Secretary Aronson for their willingness to attempt to reach an agreement on this issue. And, I hope, whatever the outcome of today's vote, our negotiations with the Administration will continue.

I also want to commend my colleagues on the other side of the aisle -- many who have approached this delicate issue with great sensitivity. Despite the differences we may have over today's vote, I have no doubt that every Member of this body shares the goal of peace with democracy in El Salvador. I have no question about this.

And, I also have no question that the President of El Salvador, Alfredo Cristiani, is a man of good will who has a deep commitment to the well being of his countrymen. I seek support for the Moakley-Murtha substitute in order to strengthen President Cristiani; to allow him the ability to lead his people to a future of peace and justice.

Mr. Speaker, over six months ago, in the middle of the night, six of the most respected Jesuit priests in El Salvador, along with their housekeeper and daughter, were brutally murdered by members of the Salvadoran military. Those who pulled the trigger and committed this heinous crime included men trained with American money, by American servicemen, on American soil. We all bear some responsibility for this crime -- in much the same way we must all bear some responsibility for the war which has claimed over 70,000 lives.

The faces of the six holy men and the mutilation of their bodies are now known to all of us, and to all Americans. But sometimes I think we have not seen, or have more easily forgotten, the faces of those 70,000 Salvadorans over the past ten years who have lost their lives because of the war.

Mr. Speaker, every human being is holy and every human soul is deserving of justice.

On December 5th, Speaker Tom Foley appointed me chairman of a special task force to monitor the Salvadoran government's investigation into the murders of the Jesuits and to report directly to him and to the Congress. The Task Force completed and submitted an interim report on April 30 -- which you have all seen.

It's a fair report -- and it's an accurate report. It calls the Jesuit investigation flawed -- and warns that the investigation is in danger of falling apart. It is important to emphasize that the investigation is in disarray despite the fact that there has been an enormous amount of international pressure demanding that justice be done in this case.

And I truly believe that the existence of the Task Force and its report --and the concern of so many in this Congress-- has helped achieve the very limited progress we have seen on the Jesuit case.

But, it is unrealistic to believe that every time there is a human rights abuse in El Salvador, the Speaker will appoint a Task Force to apply pressure to the appropriate authorities. And after 10 years of U.S. aid and influence, it is a sad commentary that Congressional delegations --both Democratic and Republican-- have felt compelled to travel to El Salvador to plead with the military, the investigators, the Attorney General and the judge to move on the case. That is troubling.

Also troubling is the fact that the murder of the Jesuits was not an isolated incident. The murders reflect problems within the Salvadoran armed forces that go far beyond the actions of a particular unit on a particular night. These murders are not simply the actions of a few renegade military and political figures operating at the margins of Salvadoran society; but they stem from attitudes and actions that go to the very heart of the armed forces and other major institutions in that country.

Time and time again we have heard top Salvadoran military and political officials label the Jesuits and other religious as "Marxists" and "enemies of the State."

Mr. Speaker, such accusations are an outrage. In the United States, such accusations would be an insult; in El Salvador, they are death sentence.

I knew two of the slain priests -- Father Segundo Montes and Father Ignacio Ellacuria. They were friends. They were men of peace who condemned the violence on both sides. In fact, President Cristiani publicly praised the work of Father Ellacuria.

But, sadly, to this day, there is an attitude of suspicion and anger towards activist segments of the church that remains all too widespread within the Salvadoran armed forces and certain other sectors of Salvadoran society. It's an attitude that allowed for the murders of the six Jesuits.

Mr. Speaker, with deep regret, I have concluded that the American people and the American Congress have been played for fools by the Salvadoran military and forces from both the left and the right who need war to continue in order to sustain and expand their power and dominance in that troubled land. Corruption is a way of life and American taxpayer money for ten years now has not been used to build peace with democracy -- but to destroy hope and build the private bank accounts of crooks who get rich at the expense of the Salvadoran people and the American people. This must end and it must end now.

Elements of the FMLN, like elements of the Salvadoran military, are committed not to peace but to war. Let me be clear that I condemn all parties and all individuals who ignore the needs of the Salvadoran people and seek only to sustain the war in order to sustain their power. The Moakley-Murtha proposal, I believe, will end this travesty and restore to the civilian government of El Salvador the rightful authority to meet the needs of its people and end the tyranny of the corrupt and violent.

Mr. Speaker, I am a bread and butter politician from South Boston -- not a foreign policy expert. This is my first foray into the world of international politics. But when it comes to the issues of life and death, justice and injustice, dignity and inhumanity -- you don't need a Ph.d. in foreign policy to take a stand.

I am taking a stand today. Enough is enough. The time to act has come. For God's sake, they killed six priests in cold blood. I stood on the ground where my friends were blown away by men to whom the sanctity of human life bears no meaning -- and men who will probably never be brought to justice.

Mr. Speaker, it is time for a change.

The Moakley-Murtha substitute puts pressure on both sides to end the violence and negotiate peace.

Peace, if it comes, could mean a restructuring of the Salvadoran armed forces -- and a major reduction in its numbers.

It could provide an opportunity to seriously reform the judiciary.

It could end the economic sabotage and political killings.

It could allow for greater respect for the views of political dissenters.

And it could allow the Salvadoran people a chance at true democracy -- something they desperately want.

Mr. Speaker, I plead with my colleagues today to help make peace a reality in El Salvador.

Vote yes on the Moakley-Murtha alternative. And vote yes on final passage of the supplemental authorization bill.