

Statement by Congressman Joe Moakley

I am delighted to be here this afternoon and to be part of today's program honoring two friends: Maria Julia Hernandez and (Lutheran) Bishop Medardo Gomez. Over the years I have learned much about El Salvador and its people from both Maria and the Bishop. I have great admiration for their work -- and for their persistence in speaking out so forcefully for human rights, justice and peace. And, as we all know, that's a dangerous thing to do in El Salvador.

Yet, despite the risks -- the threats, the intimidation, the fear -- they continue with their work. And they continue to give me hope that better days will soon come for El Salvador.

You know, I'm known as a "bread and butter," "nuts and bolts" type politician. My career in public life has been based almost exclusively on domestic issues; issues like housing, education, health care and jobs. To be honest with you, I have always felt more comfortable speaking at the opening of a Veterans hospital or at the ground breaking of a new housing complex than I have at events like this one, where I am asked to talk about foreign policy. Although, I want to make it clear, that I am honored to be here today.

But, I am one of these guys who came to Washington not to change the world --- but to change only a little part of it --- Boston.

A few years ago, back in 1983, during one of my regular post office visits in Jamaica Plain, I met with a group of constituents and 3 Salvadoran refugees on the issue of El Salvador. (Some Members of Congress hold Town Hall meetings -- I hold office hours in local post offices.)

In any event, these Salvadorans told me of their plight -- of how one of them had been tortured by the armed forces; of how they fled their homeland and left their families behind; and of how they feared that, if found by the I.N.S., the United States government would forcibly deport them.

They wanted protection.

To be honest with you, up to that point, I hadn't really paid much attention to El Salvador. I knew where it was on a map -- but that was about it.

I decided to look into the situation. I consulted with a number of human rights groups -- including many who are represented in this room today. I talked with the State Department and the Embassy. And I continued to talk with more and more Salvadoran refugees. I tried to educate myself.

I became aware of the ravages of war in El Salvador -- the human rights violations by the military and the FMLN, the targeted assassinations, the religious persecution, the searches, the torture and all the fear that is associated with war. And, at that moment, I became committed to doing everything I could to halt the deportation of Salvadoran refugees in the United States. I introduced a bill with Senator DeConcini of Arizona, which would have offered Salvadorans the protection that they so desperately needed.

Well, it's 1990 -- and although the Moakley-DeConcini bill hasn't become law -- it did pass the House....3 times! Perhaps by speaking in this Senate Caucus room, some of my friends in the Senate might get the message and act on my legislation.

But since that meeting in Jamaica Plain back in 1983, the situation in El Salvador has weighed heavily on my conscience.

As many of you may know, shortly after the six Jesuits, their cook and her young daughter were murdered on November 16, Speaker Tom Foley appointed me as chairman of a 19 member Democratic Task Force to monitor the Salvadoran government's investigation into the crime. And, with your permission, I would like to briefly say a few words on that subject.

As we all know, difficult situations are often ignored unless we are forced to deal with them. One of the most tragic elements of the crisis in El Salvador is that we in Congress, the media, and to a large extent the general public only acknowledge the Salvadoran problem when we are slapped in the face with ever increasing repugnancies.

The rape and murder of American churchwomen, ten years ago, captured our attention -- for awhile. The unthinkable murder of a Roman Catholic Archbishop (Archbishop Romero), who was shot while saying mass, shook us into debate over what we were doing in El Salvador, but quickly faded. And now, after 10 years of U.S. military aid, Salvadoran soldiers are responsible for the massacre of six Jesuit priests, their young cook and her daughter.

The murder of six holy men -- in one savage, senseless and barbaric act -- defies our moral comprehension. I knew two of the priests who were murdered. In fact, I received an award with one of them, Father Segundo Montes, in Washington -- two weeks before he was killed.

In February, I went to El Salvador with the Task Force. I visited the site of the murders. I saw the photographs of the mutilated bodies. I read the autopsy report. My friend, Segundo Montes, was face down at the moment of execution. His brain was totally blown from his cranium. All the other victims were shot execution style. In all, there were over 200 spent bullet shells

found at the scene.

I have to tell you, I am not an emotional man. But, I felt a profound sense of sadness and loss as I toured the campus of the University of Central America. As you know, these priests were brilliant theologians and respected leaders for peace. Their deaths represent a tremendous blow to El Salvador.

I also felt an enormous sense of sadness for the two women who were killed -- Mrs. Elba Julia Ramos and her daughter Marisela. They, like so many of the thousands who have died in El Salvador, are virtually unknown. If it weren't for the fact that they were murdered alongside six internationally known priests, very little attention, if any, would have been given to bringing their assassins to justice.

I recall sitting in the university chapel with 15 other Congressmen, listening to the Jesuit Provincial, Father Tojiera and the rector of the UCA, Father Estrada, calmly and patiently answer our questions about their fallen brothers. I truly have a tremendous respect for both these men. To the right of where they were standing are the graves of the Jesuits. Behind them is a picture of Archbishop Oscar Romero. And in the back of the chapel there are a series of very graphic drawings, depicting scenes of torture and death, a reminder of the many injustices that have occurred and still occur in that small country.

I thought to myself of all the human suffering; of all the tragedy; of all the pain the people of El Salvador have had to endure. And yet, despite it all, they are still hopeful. Father Tojiera and Father Estrada continued to answer our questions -- I think hoping that they were talking some sense into our heads.

I don't want to sound too abstract -- but being in that chapel -- in that atmosphere-- was a powerful moment for me. I'll never forget it.

As you know, eight members of the Salvadoran military, including a colonel, have been arrested in connection with the murders of the Jesuits and the two women. One individual implicated in the crime, a ninth man, has deserted.

The arrests of these men is obviously a positive step. And when I saw President Cristiani in El Salvador I commended him for his action. However, I told him, this is not the final curtain -- it's only the first act. We cannot and will not be satisfied with an investigation that is limited to the identification of those who actually pulled the triggers. Those who ordered or otherwise consented to the crimes must also be brought to justice.

I expect that next Monday the Task Force will release an interim report on the status of the investigation. And I will have a lot

more to say about it at that time.

Father Jose Maria Tojiera, the Jesuit Provincial of Central America, speaking at the funeral mass for the six Jesuits said: "These men have quested for truth their whole lives. Their deaths will not end this quest, nor will it end their work."

My friends, their work must go on -- and it is with men and women like Bishop Gomez and Maria Julia.

As we gather here today in this glorious room, the violence in El Salvador continues. There is tremendous suffering -- far greater than most of us can realize. And, like it or not, the United States has a role to play in all of this. And that, in turn, means that each and every one of us here has a role to play.

I do not believe that the solutions to the problems in El Salvador are easy. Indeed, at times they seem overwhelming -- an unworkable judiciary; enormous poverty; religious persecution; violence against unions; murders and threats against political leaders on the left and right; and a military that as an institution cannot distinguish between citizens engaged in non-violent methods to achieve change with those individuals who illegally take up arms.

I believe that the murder of the Jesuits grew out of 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.

I am disgusted and repulsed by the attempts of extremists in El Salvador to paint the church -- be it Catholic or Lutheran or Episcopalian -- with a red brush. If we let them get away with that kind of labeling -- then more priests, more nuns, more religious leaders and more innocent people will die.

You know, I was born and raised a Catholic in South Boston. I am not a theologian -- and God knows I should probably spend more time in church -- but my parish priest always stressed the importance of caring for the poor and the less fortunate. And the religious in El Salvador have traditionally played an historic role in bettering the lives of the millions in poverty. Make no mistake about it, helping the poor to help themselves is not subversive behavior. It's the Church's mission. It's God's work.

And that's why I have so much respect for people like Medardo Gomez and Archbishop Rivera y Damas and the religious in El Salvador who are literally risking their lives every day giving people dignity and hope.

My friends, additional acts of violence should not be the only catalyst forcing us to take action.

I believe the time has come for the Congress and the Administration to re-examine our policy towards El Salvador. There is no more time for considering military options or strategies -- and there is no more time for improving the bargaining position. The only acceptable objective now is an immediate end to the killing and real, honest-to-God negotiations aimed at achieving a permanent political settlement to the war.

United States policy must be designed to encourage the warring parties to go to the table. We must give those in El Salvador who want peace the necessary backing in order that they may achieve it.

Extremists on the right and left in El Salvador feed off each other at the expense of those in the middle. With each bombing or land mine or military offensive or murder, the space for political debate diminishes and the progress for democracy slows.

A negotiated settlement to the war is essential because far too many people have already died or been crippled or been driven into exile; because economic and social progress is not possible in the midst of civil war; because neither side can win on the battlefield; because the vast majority of Salvadoran people are sick and tired of the violence; and because the opportunity for a settlement that meets the minimum conditions of both sides has never been greater.

Peace, if it comes, could mean, as President Cristiani told me, a restructuring of the 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 the 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.

A few weeks ago, Secretary of State Baker talked with some members of Congress about the possibility of working out some sort of bi-partisan consensus on El Salvador. I was anxious to hear the Secretary of State's views because it is not often that his idea of a consensus and my idea of a consensus are the same

To be honest, he didn't say much at the meeting. Afterwards, someone asked me how it went and I said : Talking to Secretary Baker is like eating Chinese food -- you're still hungry when you're finished.

But, nevertheless, if an agreement can be worked out with the Administration that's significant and substantially different than the policy we've been pursuing for the last 10 years, I would be supportive. I am more interested in results than in partisan politics.

However, that meeting was three weeks ago --- and time is running out. I would suggest that if the Administration is stalling or is playing games on this issue -- perhaps the Congress take matters into its own hands.

My friends, one thing is certain, we cannot continue with business as usual. If we do, it won't be Members of Congress who will suffer -- it will be the people of El Salvador. And they have already suffered enough. Unfortunately, that's a point we all too often forget.

I want to again congratulate Maria and Bishop Gomez on their award. And I want to thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for your attention.