

Slaying of U.S. Labor Organizer Opens Old Wounds in El Salvador

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Washington Post Foreign Service
Thursday, December 2, 2004; Page A23

USULUTAN, El Salvador -- Gilberto Soto, a Teamsters organizer from Cliffside Park, N.J., was chatting outdoors on a cell phone during a visit to his childhood home here when three gunmen walked up and shot him in the back.

"Mama, they're killing me," Soto called out as he lay bleeding to death.

The Nov. 5 slaying of Soto, who was in El Salvador to investigate working conditions for nonunion truckers and to celebrate his 50th birthday, has caused an uproar among U.S. union leaders, who have complained to Secretary of State Colin L. Powell and Salvadoran President Elias Antonio Saca.

On Wednesday, senior U.S. union officials traveled to this provincial capital after meeting with authorities in San Salvador to protest the killing. Like Soto's family, they believe he was slain for organizing workers in a nation that human rights officials say has a long record of hostility to union labor.

"I can't see any other reason anyone would kill him," said Arely Soto de Chacon, 39, who ran outside when she heard the shots and found her dying brother, a father of three and popular figure in union circles who had emigrated to the United States in 1975 and become a U.S. citizen.

In a letter to Powell, James P. Hoffa, general president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, said Soto was killed by "what appears to be a death squad" and called the Salvadoran government's response to the crime "anemic."

The high-profile murder has drawn widespread comparisons to the killings in 1981 of two land reform advisers with the AFL-CIO in El Salvador. That crime, blamed on right-wing vigilantes, remains one of the most shocking incidents of a turbulent era in the region.

Soto's death has focused new attention on current labor conditions in El Salvador, as the U.S. Congress prepares to debate the Central American Free Trade Agreement. That pact, which would eliminate most tariffs on trade among the United States and five Central American nations, is strongly supported by President Bush but has been criticized by rights groups and Democrats for failing to adequately protect workers' rights.

Efforts throughout Central America to organize factory workers, drivers and farm laborers have consistently been thwarted by industries trying to keep wages down, according to union activists. The truckers Soto was scheduled to meet during his trip complained that they earn only about \$100 for grueling trips that can often take two weeks.

Employers in the region have often been backed by governments desperate to attract foreign investment to their poor countries, which increasingly find themselves competing with nations such as China where workers are paid even less.

Debate over the trade pact in Congress, expected to begin early in 2005, will bring to the forefront the tensions between pro-business governments that want to create more jobs and rights groups demanding decent wages and working conditions. Seventy-two Republican and Democratic members of Congress recently signed a letter to Powell pressing for an investigation of Soto's killing.

Labor officials estimate that about 5 percent of El Salvador's 2.5 million workers are unionized, a sharp decline from about 15 percent when peace accords were signed in 1992 after a decade-long civil war between leftist guerrillas and the U.S.-backed government.

Human Rights Watch, a New York-based advocacy group, and other analysts said the war years decimated Salvadoran trade unions and that pro-business officials who have controlled the government for the past 15 years have systematically crushed unions in an effort to attract foreign investment.

"They are trying to sell El Salvador as a union-free country; they see trade unions as an obstacle to investment," said Sergio Chavez, the Salvadoran representative for the New York-based National Labor Committee, which is trying to organize workers here.

Beatrice de Carrillo, El Salvador's independent human rights ombudsman, said both government and industry have "an explicit intent to destroy unions." She said union workers have been fired and blacklisted by companies trying to keep wages low.

"The government wants foreign investors to have lots of advantages and few obligations," she said.

Raul Lopez, a former truck driver who had been scheduled to meet with Soto, said he was blacklisted after he took part in a demonstration in 2001, when about 300 drivers demanding better pay and conditions shut down key roads across the country. Now, because no trucking companies will hire him, he farms corn and beans at his family home.

But Federico Colorado, president of the National Association of Private Enterprises, said private business and government officials have been working to "create a healthy dialogue" between employers and workers. "We understand the need to strengthen workers' rights," he said. "We don't oppose them."

Salvadoran authorities said they had not determined the motive for Soto's killing, and some have suggested publicly that it was random street crime, even though Soto was not robbed.

Francisco Rivas Escobar, the mayor of Usulután, met with Soto on the day he died. He said the murder echoes for many in a country where labor leaders were often targeted for assassination during the civil war.

"Remembering what we went through before, this really makes the hairs on my neck stand up," he said.

Oscar Bolaños, an official of the Center for Labor Studies and Support, a pro-union group in San Salvador, said he believed Soto was killed because someone did not want him organizing truck drivers who haul cargo to and from ports in El Salvador and Honduras. He also suspects the same people were behind a Nov. 13 break-in at his office in which the burglars took computers and files after the labor group began an e-mail campaign denouncing Soto's killing.

"They used to use bombs. Now it's just a different method," he said.

Soto's work focused on the rights of truck drivers such as Joel Cabrera, 27, who spoke to a reporter one recent afternoon at El Poy, a high-mountain border crossing between El Salvador and Honduras.

Cabrera said he trucks clothes, coffee and other finished goods from San Salvador to Puerto Cortes, the main Caribbean commercial port in Honduras. There, his cargo is loaded onto ships and he picks up fabric and other unfinished materials to haul back to assembly plants in San Salvador. He said he earns \$115 for the journey, which is 250 miles round-trip and can take anywhere from a couple of days to two weeks.

Cabrera, who works for a Salvadoran transport company, said he has no insurance. After a recent accident that caused \$800 in damage to the truck, he said, he had to work without wages for more than two months to reimburse his company. Even a broken light, he said, can cost him half a trip's income.

Cabrera's company provides drivers for a subsidiary of Maersk Sealand, the Danish shipping giant that dominates the Central American market. Teamsters officials blame Maersk for the conditions of the truck drivers and have demanded that the company allow them to organize and engage in collective bargaining.

Charles O'Connor, a spokesman for Maersk in New Jersey, said the Teamsters were "running a corporate campaign" against Maersk. He said the company has no legal responsibility to the Salvadoran drivers, who are employed by private contracted trucking companies, but that Maersk is abiding by labor laws in the United States and overseas and hires union labor all over the world. "We pay them better and treat them better" than other companies, he said. "We have nothing to hide."

But Carol Pier of Human Rights Watch, which published a recent report on Salvadoran labor, said that Maersk's position that it has no responsibility to the drivers is at odds with the practices of other major firms that rely on Salvadoran labor. "There is a growing international recognition that they have a responsibility to respect labor rights all throughout their supply chain," she said.

Rights officials said companies such as Gap Inc. and Liz Claiborne Inc. have recently begun taking steps to monitor conditions in factories contracted to manufacture their products.

For hundreds of truckers like Cabrera, there is little likelihood of gaining union protection in the near future.

"Anyone who tries to start one is fired," he said. "The owner feels threatened by unions because the more protected workers are, the less profit he makes." With high unemployment in El Salvador, he added, nobody dares agitate for unions because there are a hundred men "waiting right there at the gate."