

Thirty-five years after deaths of Cleveland churchwomen in El Salvador, U.S. policy still devalues human rights: Theresa Keeley (Opinion)



In this file photo from November 2005, Sister Ann Whitely of the Ursuline Sisters of Cleveland, bottom center, marched for peace in Columbus, Georgia, with thousands of others who remembered Sister Dorothy Kazel and other missionaries slain in El Salvador. (Michelle Yee, Columbus Ledger-Enquirer/PD file photo, 2005)

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Thirty-five years ago in El Salvador, four U.S. missionaries were **raped and murdered** [<https://www.csjsl.org/news/remembering-the-churchwomen-of-el-salvador.php>] by members of the Salvadoran National Guard. Maryknoll Sisters Maura Clarke and Ita Ford and Cleveland's Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel and lay missionary Jean Donovan were aiding Salvadorans who had fled their homes in the midst of civil war.

The women's deaths, on Dec. 2, 1980, sparked a debate about security and human rights in U.S. policy.

Today, another crisis, the flow of Central Americans, demands human rights play a greater role in U.S. policy.

Although 10,000 Salvadorans, including Blessed **Oscar Romero** [<http://www.dioceseofcleveland.org/pope-recognizes-martyrdom-of-archbishop-oscar-romero/>], were murdered in 1980, it was the churchwomen who ignited U.S. outrage. Echoing Archbishop Romero, opponents called for an end to U.S. military aid to the Salvadoran government. Others, most notably U.S. Secretary of State Alexander Haig and U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Jeanne Kirkpatrick, defended U.S. policy by insinuating the women were to blame for their own deaths.

The churchwomen's case became the benchmark for measuring U.S. concern with human rights in El Salvador. Jimmy Carter cut U.S. aid after the murders. He soon reversed course.



Christopher Evans bids adios to ex-Salvadoran general complicit in 1980 murders of churchwomen [http://www.cleveland.com/opinion/2015/03/adios_to_ex-salvadorian_general_complicit_in_1980_murders_of_churchwomen_christopher_evans.html#incart_article_small]

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Congress later required Ronald Reagan to certify every six months that El Salvador was improving its human-rights record, including making progress in the women's case. Five men were **found guilty** [<http://www.nytimes.com/1984/05/25/world/5-salvadorans-are-found-guilty-in-slaying-of-us-churchwomen.html>] in

1984. But the convictions did not address the **higher-ups** [<http://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/03/world/4-salvadorans-say-they-killed-us-nuns-on-orders-of-military.html?pagewanted=all>] or the broader human-rights implications of U.S. military aid.

U.S. aid fostered an environment that prompted Salvadorans to flee, yet the United States overwhelmingly denied Salvadorans' asylum claims. The Reagan administration could not argue that El Salvador's human-rights record was improving on one hand, while on the other, recognize that Salvadorans faced persecution.

Only three percent of Salvadorans were granted asylum status at the administrative level, in comparison to an average rate of 30 percent for other nationalities. Many deported Salvadorans were murdered upon their return. In response, people smuggled Central Americans into the United States and protected them in churches and homes as part of the sanctuary movement.

The civil war ended in 1992. It left 75,000 Salvadorans dead and cost the United States \$4 billion, but the war's legacy continues.

In the name of human rights, the United States has turned on former military allies. In April, the United States deported Gen. Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, former head of the National Guard and defense minister. Citing a 2004 law barring human-rights violators from living in the United States, the Obama administration pushed for Vides' removal on the basis that he covered up torture and murder by his troops, including those of the churchwomen.

The U.S. government is **also pushing** [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/14/world/americas/us-wants-former-salvadoran-ally-to-face-justice-in-1989-massacre.html?_r=0] to extradite former Salvadoran Defense Minister Innocente Orlando Montano Morales to Spain to face charges related to the 1989 murders of six Jesuits, their housekeeper, and her daughter. Both men graduated from the U.S. School of the Americas, now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

These U.S. actions are commendable, but the United States is not doing enough now.

Only a handful of children **have arrived** [<http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/politics/2015/11/17/first-six-teens-arrive-in-us-legally-under-central-american-minors-program/>] under the U.S. Central American Minors program. According to the **Guardian** [<http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/oct/12/obama-immigration-deportations-central-america>] newspaper and research by Elizabeth Kennedy, a social scientist at San Diego State University, some deportees have been murdered upon their return, just as some were in the 1980s.

Mexico is **preventing** [<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/11/opinion/sunday/the-refugees-at-our-door.html>] many Central Americans from reaching the United States, as President Barack Obama requested. In October, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees **warned** [<http://www.unhcr.org/5630c2046.html>] of an impending crisis from Central America's Northern Triangle.



Border crisis involving children demonstrates the need for comprehensive immigration policy: editorial
[http://www.cleveland.com/opinion/2014/07/border_crisis_involving_childr.html#incart_article_small]

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Rather than the threat of communism, opponents today argue that Central Americans threaten to drain the economy. Republican Sen. Jeff Sessions of Alabama, chair of the Senate subcommittee on immigration and the national interest, contends that the U.S. program is not a refugee one because Central Americans seek better economic opportunity and/or unification with family. He is right; an economic migrant is not a refugee. And economics and family unification are definitely motivating some.

But international law is clear: A country cannot return or expel a refugee or asylum-seeker back to where his or her life may be threatened. El Salvador ranks first in the world for female homicides and fifth for murders overall. As the United Nations **has found** [<http://www.unhcr.org/5630f24c6.pdf>], many Salvadoran women and unaccompanied children can prove a well-founded fear of persecution – necessary to claim refugee status – from gang or domestic violence.

Thirty-five years ago, the churchwomen's murders shocked the conscience of many Americans. On this anniversary, Salvadorans facing the same fate should as well.

Theresa Keeley is an assistant professor in the department of history at the University of Louisville.

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