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Under the Volcano

by Dara Kerr
May 2011

Elected in 2009, leftist Mauricio Funes became the first Salvadoran president to apologize for government death squads. Dara Kerr investigates the massacre and subsequent cover-up, the U.S. role in the killings, and the backdrop for an unprecedented apology.

Part I

On a muggy November afternoon in 1974, Dolores Alfaro and her husband descended El Salvador's Chichontepec volcano. They'd been picking coffee beans in one of the plantations dotting the steep slopes, and were returning home with full wicker baskets. Walking through the forest, Alfaro saw a half-dozen olive green trucks, packed with soldiers, cresting a hill and slowly rolling into town. There had been tensions between laborers and the military but seeing troops standing on the flatbed trucks, rifles aimed, fingers on triggers, made her realize something had changed.

On that day, a faction of the national military raided a village of unarmed civilians. The soldiers moved from house to house. By dusk, they murdered six people, imprisoned twenty-eight, and wounded dozens. This practically unknown event, named La Cayetana after this village at the foot of the volcano, marked a change in the nature of persecution in El Salvador—going from sporadic repression of select individuals to deliberate attacks on entire communities. It set the pattern for scores of government massacres to come.

Six years later, in 1980, the country's archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated—shot in the heart while celebrating Mass—his death catalyzing El Salvador's twelve-year civil war, which was marked by roving paramilitary death squads and the murder of tens of thousands. For more than a decade, the U.S. government supplied the Salvadoran military with an average of \$1 million per day and trained its troops in counterinsurgency tactics. Much of what happened was shrouded after the war ended in 1992, and the nation's congress passed amnesty laws—absolving war criminals—and official amnesia set in.

Although the war ended nearly twenty years ago, it still reverberates through Salvadoran society. In June 2009, Mauricio Funes, a member of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), a party formed by leftist guerillas, was elected president. Funes revived discussion of the war. With him in power, victims hope for recognition of past atrocities and the repeal of amnesty laws; by the same token, former soldiers and officers worry that the past will resurface.

I first learned about La Cayetana in 2005 from a Salvadoran in New York City. I was working on her asylum case for a small nonprofit called Central American Legal Assistance. She described the events of that day in 1974. I'd never heard of such an early massacre and couldn't find any corroborating documentation—which surprised me. I'd spent the previous few years living in El Salvador and researching human rights abuses. I wrote to a friend who lived near the town of La Cayetana to see if he had heard anything. After checking with some old-timers from the area, he confirmed her story.

I decided to go to El Salvador to learn more. What I discovered was that La Cayetana was a harbinger of the decade-long war—the turning point when standard army procedure first became mass murder.

Through the bus window, the Salvadoran countryside flew by. It was rainy season and the landscape was a blur of green. Rumbling past roadside vendors, sugarcane fields, and women with buckets on their heads, I wondered if I'd find the survivors. I only had one name, Pablo Anaya, and all I knew was he lived in a small village near La Cayetana.

Out the windshield, Chichontepec's volcanic summit loomed above the surrounding hills. As the bus neared, I asked the driver if he knew La Cayetana. He had no clue. "Who are you looking for?" he asked. "How could he know one lone farmer?" I thought, but said, "Pablo Anaya." From a few rows back, a woman called out, "This is where he lives." As I descended the bus steps, another woman who also got off offered to walk me to Anaya's house.

We reached a small adobe home with a tin roof; Anaya was inside resting in a hammock. He was seventy years old but seemed younger. Wearing an unbuttoned plaid shirt and a baseball hat that read "FSLN," the name of Nicaragua's socialist party, Anaya was thin and sprightly with deep-set eyes and protruding ears. His wife brought me a chair, and I told him why I came. Without hesitation, Anaya launched into his narrative. La Cayetana is now a ghost town, he said—"You'd only see remnants of where homes once were"—but in 1974 it was a bustling plantation.

Anaya lived there until he was thirty-five, when the soldiers arrived. Everyone who lived in La Cayetana, about five hundred people, worked for the same landowner—Coralía Angulo, who

hailed from one of the fourteen families, which, then and now, own most of the country's land. In 1969, life changed for La Cayetana's workers, Anaya said. Angulo rented her land to a cotton farmer who made it nearly impossible for the townspeople to survive: the cotton farmer imported workers and crop-dusted the fields with DDT, poisoning fish and livestock; they endured further restrictions on growing their own food.

Around this time, a young Catholic priest named David Rodríguez Rivera moved to a nearby church. The peasants called him "Padre David." He'd recently returned from the 1968 Medellín Bishop's Conference in Colombia where he learned about liberation theology, the idea of merging spirituality with political activism. Watching daily life in La Cayetana, his mission as a priest changed. He and other like-minded priests across the country formed peasant groups.

"Here, peasants are accustomed to listen—listen to the priest, listen to the boss, listen to the National Guard, listen to the mayor, listen to the second-in-charge, listen to everything," Padre David told me. "They are never asked for their own opinions."

La Cayetana's farmers began organizing within the Catholic Church and community groups like the farm workers union. Ultimately some, including Anaya, joined a newly formed clandestine guerrilla group—the Popular Liberation Force, or FPL. "This is the way the social and political movement in La Cayetana was born," said Anaya. Their first responsibility was to store and distribute a homemade revolutionary magazine called *El Rebelde* (The Rebel).

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As these groups organized, some peasants became bolder, Anaya said. They staged strikes, asked for better salaries and tried to rent land to grow their own food. Angulo dismissed their appeals. In early 1974, Anaya and other FPL members raised the stakes: they crept out one night and chopped down ten acres of cotton with their machetes. The next day, Angulo announced she would call the National Guard. At the time, National Guard soldiers often doubled as mercenaries for large private landowners and were known to hunt down "troublemakers." When a pair of National Guard soldiers showed up at La Cayetana, the workers claimed not to know who destroyed the cotton. Without any evidence of the culprits, the soldiers left. A few months later, the peasants burned down fields of sugarcane. "We had started to rise up and paralyze the plantation," Anaya said.

On November 26, 1974, a couple of months after the sugarcane was burned, Anaya said five military detectives arrived looking for the town's FPL group leader. They searched a suspect's house and found stacks of *El Rebelde* buried in a small hole out back—the proof they needed that subversives lived in the community. Unable to find the suspect, the detectives arrested his brother—tying him up and throwing him in the back of their jeep. As they did this, whistles and ringing bells echoed through the forest. Hundreds of peasants, finishing their day's work, came running, armed with sling-shots, machetes, and sticks. Surrounding the jeep, the peasants took the rifles from the detectives, Anaya said. Then, they filled the road with large rocks, slashed the jeep's tires, and demanded that the soldiers release their prisoner. This minor victory made the peasants realize they had power in numbers.

Defeated and angry, the military men headed back down the mountain on foot. As they left, they threatened to return within three days. “And exactly three days later, on November 29, they arrived,” Anaya said. “But this time they came with reinforcements.”

Hidden underneath cornstalks, in the middle of a field, sat a three-foot cement block. Anaya pointed to it in the distance, then wove through the tall green plants. I followed him. Fixed on the block was a weathered marble plaque; Anaya pointed to the lettering, then read aloud while tracing his finger along the words. “Martyrs of the Struggle for Land,” he said, then recited six names. We’d hiked up the same rocky dirt road to La Cayetana that the soldiers ascended over thirty-five years ago. The town of La Cayetana is one hundred yards away, but three of the people inscribed on the memorial were killed here.

That afternoon a half-dozen trucks loaded with a couple hundred National Guard soldiers and National Police rolled into town, Anaya said. Some were in uniform, others in civilian wear, and all were armed—carrying everything from rifles to submachine guns to hand grenades. On one of the trucks the soldiers set up a 51mm mortar. Trailing the caravan was an army Red Cross ambulance, strategically positioned for a fast getaway.

Most peasants were resting in their homes after work, Anaya explained. As the trucks pulled up, troops poured out and formed a human ring around the town. Other soldiers fired guns into the air and launched a mortar shell into the town’s small soccer field, then went house to house, dragging out the residents at gunpoint and chasing down anyone attempting to flee. “Very few of us escaped,” Anaya said. “Most didn’t.” Outside the ring, he was among the lucky ones. Hiding behind a tree on the hillside, about seventy yards away, he watched.

Anaya saw the soldiers capture peasants, march them to the soccer field, and force the men to lie face down in the dirt. The soldiers stripped off the peasants’s clothes, Anaya said, then walked among them, hammering the men’s heads with their rifle butts. They singled out three men, shot, and killed them.

Dolores Alfaro and her husband also saw the soldiers from the mountainside, as they carried home their coffee baskets. Hurrying down the mountain, they thought somehow they could help. On the road toward La Cayetana, they met another couple with a sixteen-year-old son, also coming to help. None of them knew three people had been killed. One hundred yards from La Cayetana, troops were guarding the road; as they approached, the soldiers demanded that the farmers drop their machetes. “If you are armed, we can be too,” the farmers replied. Angered, the soldiers forced the five peasants into a small nearby hut at gunpoint and interrogated them. When the farmers were uncooperative, one soldier shot the dirt at their feet. Furious, another soldier stormed in, grabbed the sixteen-year-old, dragged him out front, and shot him dead. Then the soldiers did the same with the boy’s father.

Next, the soldiers pulled Dolores Alfaro’s husband from the hut. Two soldiers held him by the elbows while another shot him in the chest. As he slumped to the ground, Alfaro ran out of the hut and clawed at one of the soldiers, screaming and crying. He raised his rifle, and she fell to the

ground covering her face. He cracked it across the side of her head and then, enraged, beat her in the back, wielding the butt of his rifle as if it were an axe. When he stopped, Alfaro fumbled around on the ground, bleeding. She was partially blinded from the blow to her head. She crawled to her husband and laid his head in her lap. He was still alive. She heard footsteps, then felt a loud blast gust past her face. Visionless, she touched her husband's head with her hands until she found the gaping hole above his ear. The soldier had killed her husband while she was still clutching him.

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Dolores Alfaro was seventy-nine years old when I met her. She wore her thick white hair tied back in a bun, and her impaired vision, which had worsened, gave her brown eyes a soft blue tint. Sitting in her house, gently rocking back and forth in a hammock, she told me about that day in a near whisper.

“They scraped off all of my skin here,” she said, motioning to her lower back. Then, making a chopping motion with one hand against the palm of her other, she said, “Because this is how they hit me—just like this—and blood gushed everywhere.”

The soldiers efficiently cleaned up their carnage. Alfaro said they demanded she give them burlap sacks and the wicker coffee baskets. Stripping leaves off a nearby tree, the soldiers lined the baskets; then, with machetes, they cut off the dead men's arms and legs and tossed them into the baskets, covering the tops with sacks.

Back at the soccer field, Pablo Anaya said he saw the soldiers do the same with the three men killed there. Then, he said, they selected twenty-eight others and forced them to walk naked and barefoot, blindfolded, down to the highway. The caravan of trucks, one of them carrying the dead, inched along behind.

When they reached the highway, the soldiers loaded fourteen prisoners onto one truck, lined up the other fourteen, and sprayed Mace in their eyes. One of the fourteen men forced onto the truck was Anaya's older brother.

The next day, November 30, 1974, buried deep within two of the country's newspapers, a bulletin from the Ministry of Defense was published:

“Today, at five in the afternoon, in the hamlet of La Cayetana, when National Guard and National Police patrols were searching for delinquents, they were ambushed and attacked by a group of unidentified individuals with firearms. The attack was repelled by the law enforcement agents, in reaction to the ambush. There were four deaths in the attacking group and one National Guardsman injured. The agents are in pursuit of the rest of the criminals and are also investigating the event.”

Part II

The six men killed in the La Cayetana massacre are buried about five miles from the town in a farming area called Las Cañas. It's up a dusty, bumpy road near an old train stop that's gone

unused for decades. Across from the crumbling station is a dry, weedy creek bed. This is where the National Guard soldiers dumped the bodies of the men they killed in La Cayetana.

I asked a friend of Pablo Anaya to take me there. Above the dry creek bed, he walked over to a weedy thicket and began hacking with his machete. He revealed a thigh-high stone and five short cement crosses clustered together. Hand-painted on each cross were the names of the men killed. It was a small area, about the size of a single twin bed. I looked closely at the tombstone. Hand-carved into the cement in childlike writing, it said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. —Matthew 5:10.”

As the fourteen men who were maced returned to La Cayetana, the townspeople began piecing together what happened. They made lists of who the soldiers killed and who they took away. The next day, they formed two committees, one charged with finding the bodies, the other with going to San Salvador, the capital, to file a formal complaint, locate the prisoners, and launch a public campaign. Initially, “It brought a lot of national press coverage,” Anaya said. “Because it was the first massacre in this new era.”

A local congressman named Julio Alfredo Samayoa, from the center-left Christian Democratic Party, helped lead their quest. When a dozen peasants arrived at his office the day after the massacre and told him what happened, he contacted forensic teams and justices of the peace and sent experts to La Cayetana to gather information and search for the bodies. On December 2, 1974, three days after the massacre, he filed a petition before Congress asking for a Supreme Court investigation and a formal report from the Ministry of Defense detailing what happened.

“They brought a 51mm mortar and an ambulance. All of this seems like they were trying to carry out a military operation of grand importance,” Samayoa announced in his petition. “I am certain the President of the Republic could not have given an order like this, to massacre peasants and steal their bodies, and this order also couldn’t have been given by the Minister of Defense nor the Directors of the National Guard or Police. However, one thing is evident, someone gave ‘the order,’ but who?”

Salvadoran newspapers of all political slants published articles about the “Massacre in La Cayetana.” Some blamed a priest for instigating peasants. Others simply laid out the facts, saying forensic workers found shells from G3 assault rifles and a 51mm mortar in La Cayetana’s soccer field.

The day Samayoa filed his petition in Congress, authorities located the bodies in Las Cañas. “Six rotting cadavers were found yesterday, each with a bullet wound in the thorax. The authorities ordered their burial since they were unidentified and none of them had any documents,” wrote *El Diario de Hoy*. The more left-wing *El Mundo* wrote, “Many people suspect that these deaths had something to do with the incidents between the military and civilians in La Cayetana. The cadavers have multiple bullet wounds and have been devoured by dogs and vultures.”

Dolores Alfaro and other victims’ family members went to Las Cañas to identify the bodies. “When we found them, they were very bloated. They just left them there like animals.” Alfaro said. “When I got closer to look I couldn’t take it. I took off running, it felt like I was running

through the air, as if I was flying.” Family members who stayed told her they recognized all six bodies. “This land is bathed in blood,” Alfaro said. “And still, people refuse to believe what happened.”

The supervising soldiers wouldn’t let the townspeople take the bodies back to La Cayetana for individual burials. A few family members helped to dig the small, shallow grave. I found one of these family members; she didn’t want to tell me her story, but she did confirm helping to bury the bodies and that the soldiers refused to let her take them home. “Before I die I will get the money and make a proper grave for them,” she said.

The day after the bodies were found and buried, Congress rejected Samayoa’s petition for a governmental investigation. Newspapers reported Samayoa pleading with his colleagues. At one point, he even compared La Cayetana to My Lai, the U.S. Army massacre of villagers in Vietnam. The opposing parties’ Congress members refused to comply and left the legislative chambers. Before heading out, one of them announced a warning, “The situation in La Cayetana might only be the beginning of something more grim to come.”

On December 6, one week after the massacre, the president of El Salvador, Colonel Arturo Armando Molina, visited National Guard headquarters. He met with the head of the guard, Colonel José Mario Rosales y Rosales, his staff, officers, and other top army, National Police, and Treasury Police officials. It isn’t known what they talked about, but after that, none of the mainstream newspapers wrote about La Cayetana or mentioned the fourteen prisoners who were still missing.

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Eight days after the massacre, on the evening of December 7, a vehicle dropped off the fourteen missing captives nearly ten miles from La Cayetana at a desolate place called El Playón, which later became a notorious spot where death squads dumped bodies. “The fourteen came home, but they came home ruined, beaten up, and tortured,” Anaya said. “Their entire bodies were beaten to get them to talk. Some were given electric shocks, others had internal bleeding.” With the prisoners returned and the dead buried, it seemed La Cayetana’s townspeople could do nothing more. A few days later, Anaya’s older brother died. “He died slowly,” Anaya said, with blood coming out of his ears, nose, and mouth.

General Juan Orlando Zepeda works in the last house on a dead-end street in a middle class neighborhood in San Salvador. The former vice minister of defense and director of military intelligence, Zepeda was one of the most feared generals during the civil war. The non-governmental Human Rights Commission in El Salvador, which monitored human rights abuses during the war, cites him for involvement in two hundred and ten summary executions, sixty-four instances of torture, and one hundred and ten illegal detentions throughout the 1980s. He was also accused by the UN Truth Commission of helping plan the 1989 murder of six Jesuit priests along with their cook and her daughter. Zepeda is a 1969 graduate of the U.S. Army School of the Americas, which was renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security

Cooperation in 2001. Originally located in Panama then later in Fort Benning, Georgia, this institution was designed to teach Latin American soldiers counterinsurgency tactics.

Although he doesn't have a proven connection to La Cayetana, I went to meet him—to see if he could help me understand the military's mindset at the time. Lining one wall of Zepeda's office were Spanish translations of Aristotle, Shakespeare, and Dickens. His large wooden desk was bare except for a small bible. Zepeda stood to shake my hand. The alleged war criminal was an elegant older man with a thick white mustache, dressed in slacks and a navy blue striped sweater. Behind him hung a huge portrait of when he was younger, dressed in full military regalia, his face fixed in a stern expression.

Zepeda said when the war ended he retired as a general and became president of a trash collecting company. He was also serving as president of the Academy of Military History of El Salvador, which documents military events, and wrote and self-published a book called Profiles of the War in El Salvador. I asked him what it was like for the army during the 1970s and how he could explain La Cayetana. "This was a country where there was fierce polarization between the communists and the right wing," he said. "There are tons of versions, causes and motivations about the origins. Each person has their own version."

Since La Cayetana was a rural community, the insurgent presence must have been strong, Zepeda said, and "for the army to control the rebels, there's always violence, there's always repression." In the mid-1970s, the FPL was multiplying rapidly. At one point, they had upwards of ten thousand combatants, Zepeda said. "They divided the territory into war zones to carry forth their guerrilla war, break the armed forces, and establish a Marxist, Leninist, Communist, revolutionary, popular government." He insisted that people arrested or killed were guerrillas, "because there were also people that maybe didn't have a rifle but they were sympathizers—helping with intelligence, logistics, medicine, clothes, support."

Pablo Anaya explained it differently. When I asked Anaya if the six men killed and the twenty-eight prisoners were revolutionaries, he said some were organized in unions or the church, and some were in the FPL. "And that was the motive—the military discovered there was this organization and they called all of us dangerous terrorists and communists," he said. However, the massacre spurred many who weren't part of an official movement to join, Anaya said, not only in La Cayetana but throughout the country. Padre David compared it to the plight of the early Christians, saying, "When the emperors martyred the Christians, they said, 'The blood of martyrs is the seed of more Christians.'"

As the revolutionary movement grew, the smaller factions united under the umbrella of the FMLN guerrilla group. Anaya soon devoted himself to the revolution; he learned how to blow up bridges, take down electric wires, and make Molotov cocktails. Peasants deemed traitors to the revolution or possible government spies were shunned or killed. "War is not desirable in any country—it's cruel," Anaya said. "This is why I believe that whoever is involved in war cannot say, 'My hands are clean.' If you're involved in war, your hands are always stained."

While Anaya learned guerrilla tactics, Salvadoran soldiers were also being trained. Many who rose to command level, like Zepeda, had special training at the U.S. Army School of the

Americas. Zepeda returned to the school a second time in 1975 for a course in urban counterinsurgency tactics. Over the years, the U.S. trained 6,817 Salvadoran soldiers at the school, according to School of the Americas Watch, an independent watchdog. The year La Cayetana occurred, several key Salvadoran military officials were already graduates—from the national minister of defense to the head of the National Guard for Region IV, which encompassed La Cayetana.

It's unknown if the U.S. government knew what happened at La Cayetana, but the military strategy used that day was textbook School of the Americas training. Fearing “another Vietnam,” Steven Metz, professor at the Strategic Studies Institute at the U.S. Army War College, explains in his 1995 report, *Counterinsurgency: Strategy and the Phoenix of American Capability*, Salvadoran soldiers were taught counterinsurgency operations, many with colorful names like “death by a thousand small cuts,” “iron fist,” “scorched earth,” and “hammer and anvil.”

By circling an enemy base with soldiers, then sending in other troops to drive the enemy out of hiding, the “hammer and anvil” tactic traps everyone inside the large circle in order to catch fleeing insurgents. The problem with “hammer and anvil” is that it's not very effective, according to *The Massacre at El Mozote* by Mark Danner; insurgents often escape before soldiers arrive and most people caught tend to be civilians. Although few people were killed in La Cayetana, and women and children were largely unharmed, some Salvadoran experts believe it was during this time period that the military first began to employ tactics they learned at the School of the Americas. “When the U.S. saw Nicaragua's insurgents gaining a stronghold, they came and told the Salvadoran military to implement counterinsurgency operations here,” said Wilfred Medran, a lawyer for Tutela Legal, an organization that documents the war's atrocities. After La Cayetana, “hammer and anvil” became a common Salvadoran military strategy.

“In '74 and '75, [the Salvadoran military] initiated its policy to stop what it called ‘communist danger’ and in many parts of the country selective massacres began,” said Carlos Henríquez Consalvi, director of the Museum of the Word and Image, which archives documents from the war and other Salvadoran uprisings. La Cayetana became the template for rural repression and the lack of an investigation indicated that the military could act with impunity. Waves of massacres followed.

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Six months after La Cayetana, in June 1975, the National Guard tortured and killed six farmers in the Tres Calles massacre. Then, on July 30, 1975, at the University of El Salvador, the National Guard shot at a peaceful protest, killing three students; sixteen others disappeared and were never found. Other small-scale massacres ensued. By 1977, the massacres were getting bigger, more frequent and blatant. In February, at Plaza Libertad, security forces opened fire on people protesting the recent presidential election. According to the government, the death toll was sixty; other estimates say one hundred to three hundred people died.

By 1980, El Salvador was ready to blow. On March 24, while standing at the pulpit, Archbishop Romero was assassinated by an unknown shooter with an M-16 assault rifle. The civil war was ignited.

History returned to La Cayetana on June 4, 1981. This time the military came with more troops and took over more territory. According to Anaya, they brought hundreds of soldiers, heavy artillery, and helicopters, and again enacted the “hammer and anvil” tactic. Before the soldiers arrived, the guerrillas found out and got most people out of the way. The army ransacked the vacant homes and set them on fire, rendering La Cayetana a ghost town, as it remains today.

Six months later, on December 11, 1981, the biggest massacre in modern-day Latin America happened. Using the same tactic applied twice to La Cayetana, troops crashed down on a hamlet called El Mozote in El Salvador’s northeast mountains. The soldiers stormed from house to house, dragging people into the plaza and forcing them to lie face down on the ground. The next day the killing began: men were interrogated and executed, groups of women were raped then gunned down, and dozens of children were locked in the town church and burned alive. Over two days, the soldiers killed one thousand people.

Journalists reported the killing in El Mozote, but the U.S. government at that time refused to confirm the massacre. Despite some finger wagging and lectures on human rights from Vice President George H.W. Bush, the military aid continued.

The annual presidential speech commemorating El Salvador’s peace accords of 1992 had long been a rote and empty ritual. Year after year, Salvadoran presidents urged people to “forgive and forget,” sidestepping the war’s brutal reality. But on January 16, 2010, the pattern was broken. Seven months after taking office, El Salvador’s first left-of-center president, Mauricio Funes, stood before an audience of Salvadoran and international dignitaries. It was my last day in the country, and I watched on national television as the officials sang the country’s anthem, bowed their heads for a minute of silence, and waited for the speech.

When the twelve-year war ended in a stalemate in 1992, the civilian death toll was seventy-five thousand, and between five-and-a-half thousand and eight thousand people had “disappeared” and also presumed dead—staggering numbers for a country of just five-and-a-half million at the time. Eighty-five percent of the deaths and disappearances were attributed to government forces. The 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords mandated that a new constitution be written, a UN Truth Commission be established to investigate human rights violations, and the FMLN convert from guerrilla group to political party.

The accords also required a 70 percent reduction of the military, along with a complete disbanding of the National Guard, National Police, Treasury Police, special battalions, and all armed FMLN units. With these demobilizations, however, records disappeared. Once the National Guard disbanded, a series of fires broke out in various offices where records had been sent—including where La Cayetana’s records were believed to be stored.

On March 20, 1993, the UN Truth Commission released its report naming some of the principal architects behind the war’s atrocities, including the assassination of Archbishop Romero and the

massacre at El Mozote. Five days later, the Salvadoran Congress, ruled by the right-wing party—National Republican Alliance, or ARENA—passed a general amnesty for anyone involved in human rights violations during the war. All official investigations were immediately and indefinitely halted.

ARENA held power for seventeen years and still controls Congress and the Supreme Court; but gradually the FMLN won municipalities and seats in Congress. Padre David, who left the priesthood during the war, is now serving his second term in Congress for the FMLN. When Funes took office, he was not seen as radical; a former television journalist who campaigned as a moderate, Funes only joined the FMLN in 2008.

On the eighteenth anniversary of the peace accords, Funes began the annual speech saying, “The message I want to give today is part of a debt that the Salvadoran state inherited eighteen years ago with all of its citizens and it’s my responsibility as the country’s top representative to recognize this debt and begin to pay it off.” The crowd watched intently. “I recognize that state agents including the armed forces, security forces, and other paramilitary organizations committed grave human rights violations and abuses of power. Among those crimes committed were massacres, extrajudicial executions, forced disappearances, torture, sexual abuse, arbitrary detentions, and different acts of repression.”

“For all of the above,” Funes announced, “in the name of the state of El Salvador, I apologize.” Row by row, the audience rose up, clapping. Many were crying. A few politicians remained seated with grim expressions, their hands folded in their laps. Funes was the first Salvadoran president to publicly recognize the war’s atrocities. More significantly, he apologized. When Funes reached the peroration of his speech, he reminded everyone that when El Salvador signed the peace accords it agreed never to violate human rights again. “Today, we are putting another ‘never again’ on this list,” he said. “Never again turn our backs on the victims, never again negate our history.”

Every November 2, Salvadorans bring brooms, sponges, confetti, streamers, paper-mache, and colorful flowers to cemeteries to celebrate Day of the Dead. First they clean family graves. Then, like Christmas trees, families wrap the tombstones in ornaments. By the end of the day, an uninformed on-looker wouldn’t know that graves lay beneath the flowers and confetti.

The last time I met with Anaya, he wanted to show me a section of a new park in his village. We walked up the dirt road and at the edge of town it opened up into the woods. “Here is where the ‘Memorial Park’ will be,” Anaya said. A tall monument with the names of the six men who died in La Cayetana will be built and six separate graves will be dug, he explained. Family members can decorate the graves and plant flowers. “The idea is to do something significant,” he said, “to not forget and to come here every year to commemorate this date.”

They aren’t sure when they’ll be able to exhume the grave in Las Cañas, but it appears to be in the works. Before I left, I stopped by Dolores Alfaro’s house and asked her how it was coming along. As she swayed in her hammock, she told me she was gathering her husband’s official documentation to initiate the process. “They need to know exactly how his name was spelled,

how tall he was...” She drifted off into her own thoughts for a moment. “He was tall and dark skinned,” she said, almost as if talking to herself. “Have you seen the park?”

“Yes,” I said.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” she said. “That’s where they’re going to have the burial.”