



## The President's Report June, 2004 by

Howard Dieno



The workshop that began this year for the VCST, **Refugee Resiliency, Part II "The Legal Process for the Refugee Claimant,"** was a great success. Feedback and further interest from the community for this event led to our hosting a follow-up workshop; **Refugee Resiliency, Part III, "The Health Process for the Refugee Claimant,"** on October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2003. The latter workshop was well attended, had an excellent panel of contributors, and, it planted some important seeds for other future events, and for sharing expertise with regard to the support of survivors of torture.

On Thursday, January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2004, Okot "Alfred" Ochen and myself were **interviewed** by Janine Bandcroft and Jack Erkin, for the **live radio programme "No Name News,"** at the University of Victoria's CFUV.

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On June 26<sup>th</sup> the VCST AGM took place. A new VCST Board was established, and the last year's board was appreciated for their work and commitment. Here is the new VCST Board.

### The NEW VCST Board and Members:

**Howard Dieno: President and Website Manager**

**Alfred Ochen: Vice President**

**Alvaro Moreno: Secretary**

**Ken Agar-Newman: Treasurer**

**Members at large:**

Marco Andino; Patricia Cordon; Peter Golden; Sherri Hobert; Kelli McReynolds; Cristina Shore:

**Meeting Chair;** Tomoko Okada;

Robin Pike; Jennifer Rawlinson;

Joan Schwartzenberger; Marianne van der Meij; Penny Whillans:

**Newsletter Editor, Photographer Δ**

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### *Would you like to know more about VCST?*

**Please e-mail, or call us at 250 – 388 –4728, ext. 108 and ask for Cristina Shore.**

Here are some web sites of interest:  
**International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT)**  
[irct@irct.org](mailto:irct@irct.org)<http://www.irct.org>  
**Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture:** <http://www.icomm.ca/~ccvt/>

**The VCST** was established in 1991. It is a non-profit organization that is deeply concerned with the health and welfare of people who have experienced torture.

Our mandate:

- 1- to help survivors of political violence overcome the legacy of violent oppression and return to living normal functional lives.
- 2- to provide specialized knowledge to professionals and to increase public awareness regarding survivor of torture.
- 3- to cooperate with the health community, social service agencies, immigrant settlement workers and the broader community to ensure that the needs of survivors of torture are recognized and met at all levels.Δ

### What is Torture?

**Torture:** is "any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted by or at the instigation of a public official or person for such purposes as obtaining... information or confession, or punishing... or intimidating him, her, or other persons." (UN Declaration, 1975)Δ



## Peter at the Elections in El Salvador.

by  
Peter Golden

“How can I forgive if they haven’t asked [for] forgiveness?” Those were the words of Gloria Guzman, whose father, a trade union organizer, was disappeared in El Salvador in 1982. Ms Guzman is the executive director of DIGNAS, a women’s organization established after the end of the 12-year civil war in 1992. She spoke to us about her organization and the aspirations of the Salvadoran people and their struggle to achieve justice, both individually and collectively.

*“... the right wing ARENA party would ... exceed expectations for the presidency.”*

It was as a member of the Common Borders delegation observing the presidential elections in El Salvador, held March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2004, that I met Ms Guzman. The delegation from British Columbia was sponsored by the Centre for Exchange and Solidarity (CIC) in San Salvador and accredited by the Supreme Electoral Council (TSE) of El Salvador. We arrived in El Salvador a week before the elections and participated in a variety of activities organized by CIC including meetings with non-governmental organizations, political party representatives and electoral officials.

The Presidential elections marked an important juncture.

*“... ARENA party ... is associated with the disappearances and assassinations ...”*

The Faribundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) – the left-wing opposition party – raised the possibility of a presidential victory after congressional and mayoralty elections last March saw the FMLN win a number of municipalities and become the largest party in the Congress.



Peter Golden

As the election day votes were being tallied it became apparent that the right-wing ARENA party would more than exceed expectations for the presidency with a 57% to 35% margin over the FMLN. This was a big disappointment to the FMLN and their supporters, despite doubling their popular vote.

*“FMLN... put forward Shafik Handal, a former guerrilla and leader of the Communist party ...”*

The FMLN, after a close primary, put forward Shafik Handal, a former guerrilla and leader of the Communist party of El Salvador, as their presidential candidate. At 70 years old he represented an older generation but also the memory of the armed conflict.

*“ARENA... ran “Tony” Saca, a popular sportscaster...”*

The governing party ARENA, the National Republican Alliance, ran Antonio ‘Tony’ Saca, a popular sportscaster with no previous electoral experience. ARENA is the party whose founders were associated with the disappearances and assassinations of thousands of civilians and political opponents in the 80’s and early 90’s. Rather than try to hide the links to the death squads they prominently displayed the picture of Major Roberto D’Aubuisson, the founder of ARENA, in their offices.

*“... an extremely dirty campaign ... undoubtedly influenced the final outcome...”*

D’Aubuisson was named by the United Nations Commission on the Truth for El Salvador as the person who gave the order to assassinate Archbishop Oscar Romero, as he was giving mass, in 1982. It is an indication of the polarization of the political climate of El Salvador and underlines the sentiment expressed by Ms Guzman.



The media put the leadership of FMLN at the top of the list of factors that contributed to their defeat in the presidential election, however, there was an extremely dirty campaign that undoubtedly influenced the final outcome, ARENA, spending vast amounts more than the opposition, saturated the media with a campaign asserting that the election of the FMLN would result in Salvadorans being expelled from the United States and the end of remittances from abroad that amount to more than \$2 billion dollars per year – or \$160.00 average per family.

*“... complicated voting procedure ... [and] difficulty related to inexperience...”*

These threats were given credence by several members of the USA Congress as well as Florida Governor, Jeb Bush, who visited El Salvador in the weeks prior to the election. The threats were apparently effective. Many Salvadoran families rely on the remittances to feed and house themselves as the neo-liberal policies of the governing ARENA party have resulted in a high rate of unemployment and impoverishment of much of the population of 6 million. Privatization of electricity and telephone services, for example, has resulted in severe increases in the cost of these basic services.

*“The effect of the election campaign ... challenged the fairness of the elections.”*

There were also full-page newspaper ads sponsored by ‘Women for Freedom.’ These ads suggested that if the FMLN won the election there would be a return to civil war of El Salvador would become like Cuba and the people would be deprived of basic necessities.

*“... members of the Health-care Workers’ Union ... violently arrested...”*

It was our assessment that the vote on election day was fair and transparent. Despite a complicated voting procedure and a record voter turnout, the difficulties that we observed were more related to inexperience than to fraud. However, the effect of the election campaign itself and other factors challenged the fairness of the elections overall. One of those factors was the fact that there was no system of residential voting, resulting in voters being denied the opportunity to vote if they could not travel the long distances to their voting stations. This obviously impacted the poorer sectors of the population.

*“... the struggle to fight back ... is sure to increase the polarization.”*

We also heard numerous allegations of ‘vote buying’ before election day. At a meeting with the Canadian ambassador and a Canadian representative at the Organization of American States (OAS), I suggested that the OAS might consider having trained

investigators look into allegations of vote buying. However, this suggestion got no response.

In the year before this election ARENA’s plans to privatize the health care sector were halted by the United Front of Health care Workers, including doctors, and the popular sector. It did not take long for ARENA to reassert its privatization agenda. On April 28<sup>th</sup> members of the Health-care Workers’ Union were violently arrested by armed riot police after entering El Salvador’s National Cathedral in a peaceful occupation.

The legacy of the civil War has resulted in a very polarized society; and the struggle to fight back against a renewed ARENA agenda is sure to increase the polarization. It is within this context that the FMLN will be regrouping and evaluating how to continue the struggle on the electoral front. Δ

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## THANKS To:

The VCST extends a grateful and warm “thank you” to **Timothy Whillans** for his generous contribution to the VCST. This contribution will help the VCST further its support for the victims of torture within the Victoria area.

Many thanks to the **Out-going VCST Board** for the work, commitment and hours you have dedicated to the VCST over the last year. Δ

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... President's Report Continued  
from page 1

Ken Agar-Newman has continued to keep the rest of us



Alvaro Moreno

As part of a series of “**Immigrant and Refugee Rights Workshops**” organized by VIPIRG in March, Tomoko Okada and Alvaro Moreno facilitated a **Mock Refugee Hearing**, and Marianne van der Meij conducted an **interactive workshop** that demonstrated some of the barriers faced by refugees at the various stages of their experience.



Marianne van der Meij

Peter Golden was part of a “**Common Borders**” team that traveled to El Salvador in order to observe the March presidential elections.



Ken Agar-Newman

abreast of his many discoveries and innumerable **resources on the international scene** regarding survivors of torture and related issues.

Peter Golden and Ken Agar-Newman have been working hard to



Peter Golden

ensure that the **VCST regains its Charitable Tax Number**, which had unfortunately lapsed. That should be restored within a few weeks.

Penny Whillans, our newsletter editor (and photographer) produced **two excellent newsletter editions** in the last year: Volume 1:2 in September 2003, and Volume 1:3 in December 2003.



Penny Whillans

The increasing quality of this publication gives the VSCT more of a voice and a face for the general public to hear and see, and it is very instrumental in our work.

**Many thanks to all** board members, members at large, and our excellent administrative assistant, Cristina Shore, who have all demonstrated so much enthusiasm and commitment in the many things detailed here, and in so much else besides.



Cristina Shore

To-day, on June 26<sup>th</sup>, Canada is two days away from federal election. The result of this vote appears likely to plunge the support systems of the torture survivors, with whom the VCST and other associations work, into either further erosion of federal government support, OR, into what I can only



hope I am over-stating by calling a headlong rush into the devastation of an already much-deteriorated social service system.



Tomoko Okada

While my own life has seemed to get rather busier in this last year, I am mindful of a much greater need in this community, and this country, for the work that the VCST does. **We will need to become very creative** in order to continue, much less expand, our work in this approaching year.

One creative suggestion came from Okot Ochen. He has suggested that a **befriending programme** is needed on the west coast of Canada. As a torture survivor and a refugee who arrived *Okot "Alfred" Ochen* less than a year ago, he knows and speaks from this need directly. In the VCST board's discussion and investigation of this proposal, it was found that this idea probably crosses the mandate of other agencies and associations in this locality. We are now looking at



developing active liaisons with other agencies that help to support trauma counselling along with befriending of torture survivors. Jennifer Rawlinson, a VCST member at large, has kindly volunteered to do some preliminary research around this to help us set parameters for this project. Δ

**Befriending** by Jennifer Rawlinson

*"The language of friendship is not words but meanings."*  
(Henry David Thoreau)

Greetings Readers,  
I believe an introduction to the Befriending Programme and to myself is long overdue. I first became interested in the VCST after attending two Refugee Resiliency workshops last year. I have worked with refugees for many years through my experience in ESL (English as a second language), literacy and settlement. I was immediately in awe of the excellent work that the members of the VCST have done and are doing. I began to reminisce about my days as a settlement worker in Toronto and I realized that this was really my calling in life, (in addition to having lots of kids!!!).

The idea for the befriending programme emerged when the VCST recognized the need for an organized "welcoming" programme for the torture survivors in Victoria. Most of us can only imagine the experience of fleeing one's own country for fear of persecution, only

to find one's self in a new country with different cultural attitudes and norms, and often a different language to learn. Truly, the experience of a refugee must be overwhelming.

As a community how can we welcome refugees and make their plight a little more tolerable? Personally, I think that friendship is the answer. Friendship crosses all cultural barriers and speaks to us all regardless of socio-economic status, race or country of origin. Many of us know from our own experiences that friendship can help us cope with even the darkest moments of our lives.

A major aspect of the Befriending Programme would be to match a volunteer "friend" with a refugee who has expressed an interest in this type of service. The pair would then embark on their new friendship.

In the coming months it is my hope that I will be able to create a model "Befriending Programme" with the help of others who may be interested in this endeavour. To date, I am still in the research phase of the project and I would be most appreciative if I could gather some input from other friendly folks who would like to meet and discuss this project.

If you are interested (even if you are only a little bit interested), please contact me at: telephone 250 – 885 – 4956, or e-mail [jrawlinson@pacificcoast.net](mailto:jrawlinson@pacificcoast.net)  
Peace to all. Δ



## Upcoming Events:

\* The Puente Theatre Society will present **“Long Ago and Far Away.”** This will be four after-



noons of traditional stories featuring storytellers from around the world. This is for children of all ages, so bring yourself and your children to listen to stories and tales of adventure, which are rich in cultural folklore.

**Dates:** September 18<sup>th</sup>, October 16<sup>th</sup>, November 20<sup>th</sup>, and December 18<sup>th</sup>.

**Location:** La Run Arts Centre,  
1983 Fairfield Road

**Time:** 2pm to 3:30 pm.

**Suggested Donation:** Adults, \$7.00; Children, \$5.00.

**For information:** 250-721-5828 or visit [www.puentetheatre.ca](http://www.puentetheatre.ca) Δ

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\* A proposed November

Workshop:

### **The Torture In Abu Ghraib.**

This proposed workshop aided via the Canadian Counsel for Refugees (CCR) is in the planning process. It will explore issues related to the types of torture exposed in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq this year. In particular, this workshop would focus on torture involving sexual

assault and humiliation. The role of the health care staff will be addressed and the aftermath for all. The two presenters are Peter Golden who is a member of VCST and a lawyer with over a dozen years of experience in refugee law; and Adrienne Carter, who is a psychologist with both local and international experience working with survivors of torture.

Peter will put the images and conduct revealed at Abu Ghraib prison into a historical context. Adrienne will look at the psychological aspects of torture involving sexual assault and humiliation, including the impact on the individual and the problems of reintegration into community. The programme would leave a significant amount of time for input by workshop participants. Δ

## **Congratulations!**

Congratulations to **Okot “Alfred” Ochen!** Alfred’s refugee claim was accepted by the Canadian government this summer. He is now an official landed refugee in Canada. One direct result of this is that Alfred need no longer fear that he will have to return to the danger of further torture and imprisonment in his country of Uganda. Welcome to Canada Alfred! Canada has gained a valuable person in accepting your claim and we all will be richer in knowing you. Δ



## **Message from the Editor:**

by Penny Whillans



In my position as newsletter editor I am awed by the active commitment of the people that are associated with the VCST. It takes courage and dedication to compassionately act as they do. This newsletter can only highlight their activities.

Recently the media has been aroused around the exposure of torture in Iraq. In this exposure we see pictures and hear about a very small portion of what occurs when people hold people captive; and of what is considered ‘normal’ or ‘required’ in the gathering of intelligence. It is a very small picture of something much larger; the sanctioned use of torture. This is human beings gone awry; this is human beings forgetting who we are; lost. And when lost, we loose touch with the heart of Life and abuse it.

The Canadian Red Cross-funded **Reflective Symposium on the Rwanda Genocide** on April 24, was a time of returning to the heart of Life. It was a time of sharing and engendering liaisons. We heard stories from people who truly embody Life.

This enthuses me, and so do the plans for further sharing in the development of an alive and vital befriending programme.

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I’d like to thank the VSCT for its understanding as I encountered several challenges in the preparation of this issue of the newsletter. Health issues and a fractured ankle are now a memory.Δ