El Salvador feels agony of gringo scourge: crack

by Juanita Darling Los Angeles Times March 20, 2000

SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador ---San Miguelito, a few blocks of ruined mansions and improvised shacks in the capital, is the nightmare that Central American countries denied they would ever face. It is the reality that has made the international war on drugs their war.



cocaine was a gringo — white problem and that combating it was a costly struggle the United States imposed on countries where people were too poor to buy the white pow-

They have stopped saying that. Colombia's drug traffickers, always masters of marketing, have brought the price down to the consumers' level, just as they did in the United States during the 1980s. Now, crack cocaine competes with model airplane glue or half-pints of Tic-Tac rum, selling for the change to be earned washing windshields or sweeping the floors of market stalls.

Here in San Miguelito, cocaine is melted with bicarbonate of soda into smudged little crystals that look like industrial diamonds. Those crystals are worth more than gems to the spindly children, aging men, and tired women who, for less than a dollar, can buy 20 minutes of escape from their laminated shacks built into the city's canyons, a bleak, 21st century version of cliff dwellings.

The drive to buy crack unites exguerrilla lawyer Jorge Edgardo and 14-year-old Jeremias with Yvonne, educated in the country's best parochial schools, and Raquel, a secretary who became a prostitute after an affair with her boss. They gather at the way to classes.

San Miguelito — part drug market, part refuge, a Cannery Row of crack.

These lives intersect in this oncestately neighborhood that today is an experiment in what happens when a culture of postwar, post-earthquake neglect is infused with a fast-spreading virus, and underfunded public officials scramble to find an antidote.

The air is still crisp and the morning sun reflects off the thin, wooden For years, police here have said that steeple of the Don Rua, arguably the

> Construction worker Nelson Trujillo smokes crack in what's left of the house he shares with ex-guerilla lawyer Jorge Edgardo and others.

most beautiful church in El Salvador, when the cars line up on East 23rd Street. One by one, the minivans and late-model sedans pause at the side door of Our Lady of Perpetual Help School, allowing girls in navy blue jumpers and starched white blouses to scurry into the sanctuary of the school patio, under the watchful eyes

Don Rua and Our Lady of Perpetual Help, nearly a century old, are reminders of the kind of place that San Miguelito used to be.

"It was a pleasant residential neighborhood," recalls David Escobar Galindo, a writer who lived in the area from the 1940s until the 1970s. "In those days, the social classes were not as clearly marked. That part of the city was shared by people of all social classes then the middle class [and above] moved away."

Many houses destroyed in a 1986 earthquake were never rebuilt. Refugees fleeing the war squatted in the shells, and others built shanties around the original neighborhood. Then crack arrived, and with it users who support their habit by begging, stealing, and prostitution. San Miguelito became no more than an obstacle for the students of Our Lady of Perpetual Help to cross on their

The few who walk to school

from a wealthy family, rents here in firmly clasped by the hands of their longs to Wilfredo. nannies or mothers as they pass the corner where Raquel, in a worn black velvet jacket, black teddy, and short green satin skirt, whistles to passersby.

"I'm up early because I need some breakfast," she says, shaking her curly ponytail with an almost compulsive flirtatiousness. At this moment, she wants money for food, but she admits, "Most of us out on the street are crack addicts.'

She is the daughter of evangelical Christians who sent her to secretarial school. After an affair with her first boss, she was fired and kicked out of her parents' home. She got a job in an exclusive brothel, where she discovered cocaine. That was 12 years ago. Nowadays, at age 34, unbathed and her face drawn by drug abuse, she will accept a client for as little as the 50 cents that a rock of crack costs. No religion or social status provides protection from crack.

Just a decade ago, Yvonne was one of those blue-jumpered school girls, chauffeured here from better neighborhoods. She never expected to end up living in San Miguelito.

In high school, she transferred to the San Jose Day School, a Jesuit institution considered the strictest and most academically demanding parochial school in the country. She was a second-year law student at the prestigious Matias Delgado University when she first tried crack. That was three years ago.

"I don't know what happened," she says, shrugging. "Crack gets to you."

Today, Yvonne is an emaciated, dark-haired beauty who walks with a limp that she says she got in a beating, maybe by police, maybe by someone with a sadistic streak who saw her sleeping in the gutter. Since she was kicked out of Wilfredo's crack house for some infraction that she does not want to discuss, Yvonne cannot always find a place to sleep.

She hangs around outside or in one of the brothels across the street, begging for money. When she has gathered the equivalent of 50 cents, she approaches Wilfredo's barred door, shows her coins, and is ushered in-

Yvonne walks past two guards holding rifles, through a living room with peeling paint on the walls and mismatched furniture and into a small room with a bare lightbulb that illuminates a huge wooden desk that be-

With red locks falling across his forehead, widely spaced green eyes, freckles, and the band of lost boys and girls who gather around him, it is easy at first to mistake Wilfredo for a sort of Peter Pan.

About a year ago, Wilfredo rented a spacious fixer-upper for \$115 a month. It is one of more than 200 crack houses that operate in greater San Salvador, police estimate. "It's sort of a commune," he says. "If someone has no place to bathe or sleep, he can do it here." Customers can also smoke crack inside — an important consideration, because Salvadoran law prohibits selling drugs and consuming them in public, but not using them in private.

Wilfredo built up a staff, including Juan Carlos, a crack-using lawyer, to get commune members out of jail, and Angel, a muscular ex-guerrilla who watches the door. Wilfredo was arrested five times in the first six months he ran the house, on drug or assault charges. Juan Carlos would always win his release.

Then, in November, police raided the house, taking everyone into custody, including Wilfredo. Juan Carlos went to court the next day to post bail, and he was arrested as well.

Margarita, Elizabeth and Jeremias were hardly saddened by the raid on Wilfredo's. They simply hustled for coins down the block at Tutunichapa, a labyrinth of shanties and open sewers that sprung up in the 1980s to house refugees from the war-torn countryside.

"Five years ago, a gram of cocaine cost 800 colones," or about \$91, he says. "It was too expensive for people to buy."

That was when U.S. and Colombian authorities were breaking up the Medellin and Cali drug cartels, which controlled the international cocaine trade. Those cartels were replaced by smaller, more flexible organizations that began to pay Central American smugglers in kind, U.S. court documents and government reports show.

The result: an ever-increasing amount of cocaine began staying here instead of moving north,

Police raid Tutunichapa frequently, but when they leave, the crack users

Jorge Edgardo, 43, shares the shell of a house destroyed in the earthquake with several chickens and a group that includes Nelson Trujillo,

homemaker whose husband introduced her to crack, then abandoned her when she became an addict.

Jorge Edgardo came to the capital in 1974, looking for opportunities. He got a job at the National University of El Salvador, began to study law, and was drawn into the university's leftist movement, an important foundation of the Marxist guerrillas who took up arms in 1980. He visited imprisoned rebels and joined in guerrilla attacks himself before turning in his arms with the signing of a peace accord in 1992.

He took a job in a law firm but then watched with growing bitterness as he saw the principles he fought for negotiated away in the National Assembly or pushed aside by political

Two years ago, some friends offered him cocaine. "It was an escape from reality," he says. "But when you come back, the problems are twice as

Cocaine took over his life almost immediately. He quickly switched to the cheaper, more intense crack.

In contrast, Jeremias, the 14-yearold, says he does not remember a life without crack. For the last four years, he has awakened each day on the sidewalk in front of an open-air market. When he gets up, he stands on Espana Avenue, the neighborhood's main thoroughfare, waiting for cars to slow, expectantly.

The occupants send him to

a construction worker; and Pati, a Wilfredo's to buy crack or cocaine, and he keeps a little for himself. Every shirt, every piece of candy he is given is sold to buy crack. No one is sure how the skinny, ragged child sur-

Rosario Maravilla Rivera watches him every day from the cart where she sells fresh coconuts, and she frets. With four children ages 3 to 15, drug addiction is high on her list of worries. When her husband lost his job as a soil studies technician four years ago, the family had to move to Tutunichapa.

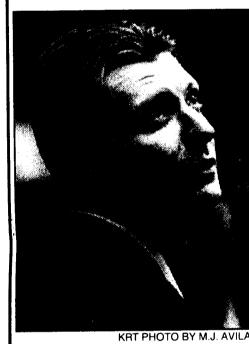
"I cannot leave them in the house," Rivera says. "They come from school to the market and do not go home until I do." So the children end up doing their homework on the sidewalk or on the hood of the pickup their father uses to haul goods for customers. They walk home past rows of addicts and hear the sounds of fights and raids all night.

Police, with limited resources, often must choose between the concerns of their own citizens, like the Rivera family, and U.S. pressure to stop the big drug shipments, Perez

"We cannot stop the big drug shipments if we are concentrating our efforts on local consumption," he says. "Salvadorans do not care how many tons of cocaine pass through here on the way to the United States; they care about the crack being sold on the cor-

Joshua Cole, 19, of

STUDENT CONVICTED



Southgate, Mich., was convicted of involuntary manslaughter and mixing and mingling a harmful substance on March 14 in Detroit, Mich. During a January 1999 party, Cole mixed the date rape drug GHB into drinks consumed by Samantha Reid, 15, and Melenie Sendone, 16. Reid died and Sendone went into a coma.

Kuomintang loss to Progressives marks historic Taiwan turning point itself out in the cold. In the United This year, in Taiwan's election cammunist regime was rooting for the KMT whose leaders have few if any personal

by Jim Mann Los Angeles Times March 18, 2000

TAIPEI, Taiwan — The devastating electoral defeat of Taiwan's ruling Kuomintang, or Nationalist Party, represents an historic turning point both for this island of 22 million people and for China.

Not since the Japanese relinquished control of Taiwan at the end of World War II has anyone from outside the Kuomintang held power here. The party's rule has been part of the fabric of daily life for half a century.

Even Taiwan's currency still carries the image of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, who brought the Kuomintang, or KMT, here in the last days of the civil war he lost on the mainland.

Now, the KMT is turning over the presidency to a political entity, the Democratic Progressive Party, that the KMT didn't even permit to organize

until 14 years ago. At the time, in 1986, the KMT believed that it could continue to hold on to power in Taiwan for decades -- in the fashion of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party, which in those days allowed other parties to participate in

elections, but not to win. The Democratic Progressives arose as the political vehicle for native Taiwanese, who make up 80 percent of the island's population and who were, until the late 1980s, excluded from the top ranks of the KMT.

In some ways, Chen's victory Saturday was comparable to the victories of Kim Dae Jung in South Korea and Corazon Aquino in the Philippines. In each case, Asian opposition movements challenged authoritarian regimes for many years until eventually, with the help of elections and political liberalization, they came to power themselves.

In other ways, however, Chen's remarkable victory can't be compared to 'what has happened anywhere else, because of the huge, looming presence of China in Taiwan's political life.

The election of an opposition candidate ruptures, at least for the time being, nearly eight decades of on-again, off-again ties between the Chinese Communist Party and the KMT. Those ties involve so much conflict, manipulation, and intimacy that a psychologist might diagnose the two groups as codependent.

In the early decades of the 20th century, the men who led the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party knew one another well. Many of them went to school with one another at the Huangpu Military Academy in southern China.

When Chiang ruled mainland China, the Communists occasionally formed "united fronts" with the KMT --- that is, coalitions of convenience, designed sometimes to fight the Japanese but also to give both sides time to regroup and regain strength in their continuing civil

Eventually, the "united front" campaigns would break down, and the two sets of antagonists would go back to killing one another.

When the KMT fled to Taiwan, its rivalry with the Communists continued for decades. In Taiwan, pictures of such Communist leaders as Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai were regularly

stamped with the word 'bandits." And yet, despite the enmity, China's Communists also for years counted on the KMT as its best hope for reunifying Taiwan with the mainland.

China's logic was simple: many of the KMT leaders had fled to Taiwan from the mainland, and eventually, Beijing hoped, the KMT would want to make a deal enabling them to return

But this calculation began to erode in the mid-1980s. Oddly enough, the chain of events that culminated with Saturday's Democratic Progressive victory began with a Communist Party triumph: in 1979, the United States finally granted diplomatic recognition to the People's Republic of China and cut off ties with the Nationalists' Republic of China on Taiwan.

In the early '80s, Taiwan thus found

States it had little public support, because the KMT was repressive and undemocratic. Taiwanese intelligence officials were caught and eventually convicted of murdering a Taiwanese opposition writer on American soil.

Finally, in 1986, President Chiang Ching-kuo, Chiang Kai-shek's son, decided to open up Taiwan's political life. He permitted the Democratic Progressives to take part in elections. At the same time, he also groomed a native Taiwanese leader, Lee Teng-hui, to be his successor.

Both actions served to revive Taiwan's flagging support in the United States. After the 1989 Tiananmen Soare crackdown in Beijing, Taiwan could legitimately tell Congress that it was democratizing while China was certainly

Lee came to power after the younger Chiang's death in 1988. That was, by itself, a significant change: for the first time, Taiwan's president did not come from mainland China. The old KMT-Communist ties were beginning to fray.

And indeed, over the past 12 years, Lee has given Beijing fits. He has carried out a series of initiatives to establish Taiwan as an independent political entity, culminating in his insistence last summer that Taiwan should have "special state-to-state relations" with China.

On the mainland early this year, several Chinese scholars and officials said they felt that any of the three leading candidates in Taiwan's election would be an improvement over their nemesis, Lee Teng-hui.

Yet it turned out that the curious historical ties between the Communists and the Kuomintang outweighed China's irritation with Lee.

In the last weeks of the presidential campaign, China was all but begging Taiwanese voters to elect Lee's designated successor, Lien Chan, the candidate of the KMT.

It was the ultimate irony. For decades, when the KMT ruled the mainland, the Communists had portrayed it (often with good reason) as corrupt.

paign, the main issue Chen's forces used against the KMT was, once again, corruption. But this time, China's Com-

to win.

Now, China will have to begin a new

history with a new political force.

ties to the mainland.

the NRA inton spars with

by Virginia Groark Chicago Tribune March 15, 2000

Carrying an agenda for an unfin-

ished second term and raising campaign cash to try to help his vice president succeed him, President Clinton spent a fundraising evening in Chicago on Monday, March 13, promoting gun-control initiatives to

help spur Democrats for the fall.

ts to Stefani's restaurant, 1418 W. Fullerton Ave., and the Lincolnwood home of veteran Democratic activist Michael Cherry raised nearly \$790,000 for the Demo-

Clinton's vis-

cratic National Committee. Those are "soft money" contributions that can be used to help President Clinton, joined by a bipartisan group of members of Vice President Al Gore's presi-

dential cam- National Instant Criminal Background Check System. paign as well as Democratic congressional candi-

> But more than just raising cash for an anticipated bitter fall carnpaign between Gore and his Republican rival, Texas Gov. George W. Bush, Clinton used his visit to continue his offensive against the National Rifle Association and its leadership after the group accused the in the television commercials.

White House of using gun deaths to further its political interests.

"I'm just trying to keep more people alive," Clinton told about 350 people at the restaurant, defending his push for trigger locks as well as a 72-hour waiting period and background checks for firearms purchasers at gun shows.

The NRA has stepped up its criticism of Clinton in recent days.

Congress including Rep. Zoe Lofgren, (D-CA) left, and Rep. Carolyn

McCarthy, (D-NY) right, unveiled the FBI's first annual report on the

In a new advertising campaign,

NRA President Charlton Heston

stops just short of accusing Clinton

of lying in blasting the gun-rights

group as an obstacle to new laws

"When what you say is wrong,

and public safety.

which are airing on network affili ates and cable networks.

In addition, NRA Executive Director Wayne LaPierre said Sunday, March 12, that the President "needs a certain level of violence in this country" and is "willing to accept a certain level of killing to further his political agenda and his vice president too."

"I didn't like that," Clinton re-

sponded. "I've met with a lot of people who have died from violence and I just want to keep more people alive."

> The ac cusations flying between Clinton and the NRA also provide added fodder for the fall presidential campaign Gun control, the President said, was one example of the differences that exist between the presumptive Demo-

cratic and Republican nominees.

Bush, as Texas governor, signed into law a measure allowing qualified residents to carry concealed firearms. Bush also has said he supports mandating the sale of trigger locks with firearms but not requiring their use, contending such a law would be unenforceable without creating "trigger lock police."

that's a mistake. When you know it's wrong, that's a lie," Heston says

KRT PHOTO BY CHUCK KENNEDY