

6-17-2004

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## Recommended Citation

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## **Costa Rica And Nicaragua Remember La Penca and Ronald Reagan**

*by LADB Staff*

*Category/Department: Costa Rica Nicaragua*

*Published: 2004-06-17*

Former US President Ronald Reagan died just days after the 20th anniversary of the bombing at La Penca, a place inside Nicaragua on the Costa Rica border. The bombing, an act of terrorism almost entirely forgotten in the US, is well-remembered in a region that was once the focus of Reagan's foreign policy. The May 30, 1984, explosion at a press conference called by Eden Pastora, the famed Sandinista Comandante Cero of the 1979 Nicaraguan revolution, left four dead, three of them journalists. Since then, books have been written and lawsuits launched, but no one has ever been tried for a multiple murder that Costa Rica still treats as an active case that is seriously stalled.

Attorney General Francisco Dall'Anese has blamed US obstruction in the form of blocked access to classified documents. In a Feb. 27, 2004, letter to Costa Rica's Defensor de los Habitantes Jose Manuel Echandi, he enumerated the reasons for the deadlock:

Exhaustive investigations in Costa Rica have not yielded sufficient results to bring a case to trial.

Documents in the possession of the Senate of the United States of America have been declared secret by the US government and are therefore inaccessible.

It has not been possible to identify the "material author" of the crime, not even through Interpol, and efforts to extradite US citizen John Hull and Miami-based Cuban-American Felipe Vidal have been fruitless.

Of the three reasons, Dall'Anese said in the letter, "The second point [the Senate documents] is the major obstacle to terminating the investigations because the identity of the author of the deeds could be established and linked to Hull, and, without evidence, it is impossible to found an accusation." Costa Rican authorities have attempted to extradite two alleged CIA collaborators, Hull and Vidal, from the US, but to no avail. Hull operated a ranch on the Costa Rica-Nicaragua border identified by resupply pilots as a transshipment point for military supplies and drugs. In the present Washington climate, authorities have little hope of gaining access either to information or to material witnesses.

But prosecutor Paula Guido, who has had responsibility for the case for the past three years, said she is preparing a case to present in Costa Rica rather than wait years for a declassification of documents that may never come. Missing the mark Eden Pastora, a central figure in the case, was a disaffected Sandinista commander who went over to the US side, operating out of a safe zone in Costa Rica, just across the Nicaragua border. Most people following this case concur Pastora was the presumptive target of the bombing. He had called a press conference at his camp on the Rio San Juan at which he was expected to announce his refusal to join the other US-backed contras.

Though estranged from the Sandinistas, the leader of the takeover of the 1978 National Palace in Managua wanted no part of surrogates fresh from the ranks of an earlier US creation, Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza's repressive National Guard. But Pastora had CIA support anyway, and for that reason it is unclear who might have plotted his assassination. Both the US and the Sandinistas had reason to want him dead. He told *The Tico Times* recently that he thinks both the CIA and the Sandinistas were involved. They both needed him killed to facilitate the implementation of a war-ending agreement secretly signed by the two sides in Manzanillo, Mexico, earlier in 1984.

He told *The Tico Times*, whose reporter Linda Frazier was killed in the explosion, "It was a cross of interests. The Frente [Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional, FSLN] and a rightwing sector of the United States wanted to kill me. The Frente supplied the manpower and the CIA supplied the technology." Pastora explained the collaboration, saying, "The gringos do not have enemies or friends, they only have interests."

Martha Honey, a US journalist who conducted an 18-month investigation into the incident along with her husband Tony Avirgan who was injured in the blast, concurred with the premise. "The more indications there are, the more there is the real sense of a lack of resolution, and the trail points to both the CIA and the Sandinistas. My guess is it involved both sides." That contradictory convergence of interests, together with the ineptness of execution, eventually rose out of subtext to become the story itself.

John McPhaul, managing editor of *The Tico Times* in 1984, told the paper, "La Penca really seemed to have a double dimension. There was La Penca the despicable crime and terrorist act, and La Penca the political sideshow. At times during the course of the La Penca investigation many seemed more interested in pinning the crime on one side or the other than in bringing the facts to light and letting them speak for themselves." Bomber named, but doubts persist Eventually, the person who planted the bomb was identified by name. He was, according to a Miami Herald investigative report nearly a decade later, a member of a pro-Sandinista Argentine group.

His name was Vital Roberto Gaguine. He was reportedly killed in a 1989 attack on an Argentine military base. At La Penca, Gaguine was posing as a journalist with the stolen passport of a Dane named Per Anker Hansen. The association between the perpetrator and the FSLN led the Herald reporter, Juan Tamayo, to conclude that the Sandinistas were solely responsible. But that conclusion has not found universal acceptance among those still working on to the case.

Guido said, "About the real identity of Per Anker Hansen, I still have some doubts." Summing the efforts at solving the crime to date, Robert Rivard, Newsweek magazine's Central American bureau chief at the time of the bombing, told *The Tico Times*, "La Penca was an unjustifiable act of terror, and there is blame enough for all the region's players to bear: the Sandinistas and the US intelligence community, each of whom believed their ends justified the means; Eden Pastora, a weekend revolutionary propped up by the Reagan administration, who saw to his own evacuation from the jungle while Linda Frazier was left behind to bleed to death; and even Costa Rica, which turned a blind eye to so much covert activity on its own soil." Linda Frazier's husband Joe Frazier, an Associated Press correspondent in the region for decades, has suspicions running long and deep.

The US Embassy marked the anniversary with a denial of any involvement in La Penca, but Frazier, remembering the Reagan years in Central America, said, "I don't think the United States has done anything at all to attempt to find out what happened. Under the administration at the time, it couldn't have cared less." Frazier said his suspicion of US involvement has grown through the years. He recounted an incident. "I was talking to a former [US] ambassador to Honduras, and we were discussing [La Penca] and he asked, 'Do you think we did it?' and I said, 'I think you certainly knew about it, and probably signed off on it,' and he was silent, didn't say a word."

Attorney General Dall'Anese concluded in his letter to Echandi, "In this situation, the appropriate thing is to maintain an open investigation awaiting evidence that could come to lessen the uncertainty of the process, because given the gravity of the acts, it is not acceptable to close the investigation at the moment." The La Penca bombing ranks among the very smallest of incidents of violent death that mark the Reagan legacy in Central America, but along with the thousands who mourn their dead in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, reporters, too, remember their own.

-- End --