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Charges Dropped & Later Reinstated Against Rightist Salvadorans Accused Of Running Kidnapping Ring

by Deborah Tyroler

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Late March 31, in his last decision before reassignment, Judge Juan Hector Larios of El Salvador's 3rd Criminal Court ruled that there was insufficient evidence to prosecute eight rightist defendants accused of running a kidnapping ring. The eight include former military officers and civilians, and are close associates of Roberto d'Aubuisson, the lifetime honorary president of the National Republican Alliance (ARENA). The judge's move was seen by some observers as a demonstration that president-elect Alfredo Cristiani is a figurehead leader of ARENA. Larios ordered the release of three defendants who had been imprisoned: Orlando Llovera Ballete, an industrialist; Jose Alfredo Jiminez Moreno, a former army major, and Rodolfo Lopez Sibrian, a former army lieutenant. Both former officers are close to d'Aubuisson, who was accused by government officials of trying to hide Lopez Sibrian. He and others accused of being members of the kidnapping ring were reported among the conspirators in a failed 1980 coup attempt led by d'Aubuisson. Lopez Sibrian was also charged in the 1981 murders of a Salvadoran land reform agency official and two US advisers. The charges against Lopez Sibrian, who was later dismissed from the army, were dropped because of lack of evidence. Five years later, two former army corporals were convicted in the case. Larios also dismissed arrest warrants for five other suspects in the case, including former military officers who left the country hours before they were to be arrested and charged. Among others implicated in the case was Lt.Col. Roberto Mauricio Staben, commander of the US-trained Arce Battalion until a recent transfer. Until 1984 he commanded the barracks next to El Playon, a dumping ground for the bodies of death squad victims. The kidnapping ring, whose members were said to have posed as leftist guerrillas, was broken up three years ago. Defendants were charged with kidnapping five wealthy businessmen between 1980 and 1985 for about \$5 million in ransom. Their prosecution was delayed by the deaths of key witnesses and threats against court officers. Implicated in the case were Oporto Tereson Roman, Moises Lopez Arriola and detective Edgardo Sigfredo Linares, who all died under suspicious circumstances in the following months. One was found hanged in his jail cell, another was shot when he reportedly tried to escape police custody, and the other was gunned down just outside El Salvador. Authorities said the three could have provided important information in the case. In 1988, military Judge Jorge Alberto Serrano Panameno, who had initiated the case in 1986, was assassinated while taking his children to school. In his decision, Larios ruled that statements from witnesses were not reliable, and declared null the acts of Serrano. The case was transferred to civilian court in 1988 after it was ruled the crimes were not politically motivated. On April 3, Judge Ricardo Mejia Angulo of the 3rd Criminal Court told journalists he voided Larios' March 31 ruling. Mejia Angulo's action included a new order for the provisional detention of the three imprisoned defendants ordered released by Lario. Jose Guerrero, president of the Supreme Court, told journalists that Larios, who transferred to a Civil Court post April 3, has been suspended pending investigation of his ruling regarding the alleged kidnappers. Larios had ruled that the three had been arrested in 1986 under emergency legislation no longer in effect, making their detentions illegal. Only Llovera was released. His whereabouts were unknown as of April 3. The release order concerning the other two men was not implemented before Mejia Angulo's action. The judge also

issued new arrest warrants, replacing those canceled by Larios, for the other five allegedly involved in the ring. The case has not gone to trial. (Basic data from AP, 04/01/89, 04/03/89; New York Times, 04/02/89)

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