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U.S. Ambassador Clashes With Salvadoran Army Officer

by Deborah Tyroler

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On May 2, violence was narrowly avoided in a confrontation between US Ambassador William Walker's security forces and Salvadoran soldiers traveling with Col. Jesus de Natividad Caceres on a country road. Walker was reportedly furious, and began pushing to see Caceres transferred outside the country. The Washington Post reported that the US Embassy declined numerous requests to comment on the incident. On May 26, the military command permitted Caceres to hold a press conference to give his version of the affair due to reports that he was being transferred from his post because of the clash with Walker. Caceres said he was returning by car to Sonsonate, 30 miles west of San Salvador, where he is commander of the 6th Detachment, followed by an armored vehicle and pickup truck full of uniformed soldiers. He said he tried to pass when he saw two armored cars ahead of him. The officer said that one of the cars blocked his path. When he blew his horn, the back door was opened and civilians aimed rifles and shotguns at him. Caceres said he then ordered his own armored car and troops to pass the other vehicles "at all costs." Next, after passing the armored cars, Caceres said he ordered his vehicles to stop, blocking the road and forcing the US ambassador's caravan to stop. Caceres said he then approached Walker's white Cadillac, identified himself by name and rank, and asked to speak to the person in charge. He did not know it was Walker. The colonel said his troops positioned themselves on both sides of the road, but did not aim their weapons at the vehicle. Caceres said that when he saw it was Walker, he warned the ambassador that his security guards were causing serious problems with their behavior. Walker, said Caceres, replied, "I trust my security; that is why I am still alive." Caceres said he shook hands and left, despite feeling "threatened" and "endangered" by the ambassador's armed guards, who he said maintained a "violent" attitude. Other unidentified informed sources, who were not present, were cited by the Post. They said that in fact Caceres' troops, aimed their weapons and surrounded Walker's car. The situation was very tense, and the colonel left after a heated exchange with Walker. The sources cited by the Post said it was almost impossible for Caceres not to know the cars were the US ambassador's vehicles, and that the colonel violated safety protocol by attempting to pass the armed caravan. (Basic data from Washington Post, 05/27/89)

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