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Deborah Tyroler

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Report On Salvadoran Justice System; Former Attorney General Fears For His Life

by Deborah Tyroler
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In 1984 the US began funding a $14 million program to improve the Salvadoran judicial system. The program included the construction of a new forensics laboratory in hopes that the Salvadoran police would rely less on confessions, frequently extracted under torture. Next, a special unit was established to investigate human rights abuse cases. Teams of lawyers have been drafting volumes of legal code revisions. Despite the US funding, a recent report by the New York-based Lawyers Committee for Human Rights described the Salvadoran judicial system as "dangerously close to collapse." According to the report, "Today the system is racked by fear, intimidation, and political meddling... Judges and lawyers are regularly subjected to bribery attempts and threats of violence. Several courageous judges and lawyers who have sought to advance justice in sensitive cases have resigned in the past year, fearful of the consequences of pursuing the truth." Virtually none of the reforms recommended by the US-funded program have become law, i.e., the National Assembly has not voted approval. The special investigative unit, under military direction, has been concentrating its efforts on crimes such as auto theft, baby kidnapping and corruption. The Lawyers Committee report noted: "Officers of the military and El Salvador's three security forces are practically immune from successful prosecution, even where ample evidence exists to bring them to trial." An example of the intimidation suffered by members of the Salvadoran judiciary is the case of Roberto Giron, El Salvador's former Attorney General until dismissed from the post in December by the ARENA-controlled National Assembly. Giron fears for his life, concerned that persons angered by his persistent investigation into the 1980 murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero may attempt to extract revenge. Since the government will no longer provide Giron with bodyguards, he attempts to throw off possible assassins by varying the schedule and route of daily trips to his law office. Giron has a visa to enter the US. However, he cannot afford to move his large family there without financial assistance. [Basic data from Latinamerica Press (Peru), 05/04/89, summarized by Central America Resource Center, Minneapolis, Minn.]

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