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El Salvador: Jesuit Priests Murdered At Simeon Canas Central American University (s/s)

by Deborah Tyroler

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At about 3 a.m. Thursday, six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her 15-year-old daughter were murdered at their residence close to the campus of the Jose Simeon Canas Central American University (UCA). The dead included Ignacio Ellacuria, rector of the Simeon Canas Central American University (UCA), vice rector Ignacio Martin-Baro, and educators Segundo Montes, Amando Lopez, Juan Ramon Moreno, Joaquin Lopez Lopez, Julia Elba Ramos and Celina Ramos. According to the Rev. Jose Maria Tojeira, Jesuit Provincial for Central America: "They were assassinated with lavish barbarity. For example, they took out their brains." An early AP report said that the victims' faces were disfigured and their brains removed from their skulls. At later AP report stated that reporters who saw the victims at the house said their bodies were riddled with bullets, some of them having been fired in the heads. A communique by the FMLN general command broadcast by Radio Venceremos said that the eight victims had been shot to death with machine guns, and that three of the bodies were moved to a garden outside the house and shot in the head. The home of the Jesuits is located behind the university campus, on the southwest side of the capital, where there has been fighting. Most of the fighting was concentrated on the east and north sides and part of the west side of the city. A Jesuit priest who spoke on condition of anonymity told journalists at the site that a witness saw about 30 uniformed soldiers enter the university grounds and the priests' residence shortly before gunshots were heard. He said, "There have been soldiers posted at the gate since Sunday. The murders were committed in the middle of a curfew. The same house where they were killed was raided and searched by soldiers on Tuesday." Eduardo Valdez, Director of Jesuit Studies, said the Jesuits had received many anonymous threats in past days and that a rightist death squad was probably responsible for the killings. For over a decade, rightists have accused the Jesuit order and its university of fostering subversive ideology. The educators had received death threats since the rebel offensive began Saturday, and callers to radio talk shows had vehemently chastised Jesuits as subversives and demanded their expulsion or punishment. UCA is considered one of the region's most prestigious institutions of higher education. Martin-Baro was the country's leading expert on polls and polling procedures. Lopez Lopez was a native Salvadoran; Ellacuria and the other priests were Spaniards who had become naturalized citizens. After leading a prayer over the bodies, Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas said, "If this spiral of violence continues, death and destruction will sweep away many, especially those who are of most use to our people. The government condemned the killings, and promised an immediate investigation. US Ambassador William Walker told AP that the US was prepared to offer protection to anyone who would come forward with information about the massacre of the priests. He said he planned to contact officials at UCA who have said two witnesses saw about 30 men in army uniforms enter the priests' residence just before the shooting began. The Rev. Tojeira said the terrified witnesses had gone into hiding and did not trust authorities because troops were implicated in the killings. At the Vatican on Friday, Pope John Paul II decried the murder of the Jesuits, calling it an act of "abominable violence." Also on Friday, Canadian Foreign Minister Joseph Clark condemned the torture and murder of the six priests and two women. He said that it was

evident the ARENA government cannot or does not wish to control the activities of extremists. A letter by Americas Watch to Secretary of State James Baker and Asst. Secretary for Inter-American Affairs Bernard Aronson, follows: "We have received reports that 30 heavily armed, uniformed soldiers of the Salvadoran Armed Forces executed six Jesuit priests, their cook and her 15-year-old daughter at 3 a.m. this morning, during the Army-imposed curfew, in the Jesuit rectory in San Salvador, El Salvador. According to church officials interviewed this morning in San Salvador, a large contingent of soldiers has surrounded the University of Central America for the past several days and, on Monday, a group of soldiers searched the Jesuit rectory while Father Ignacio Ellacuria was present. Father Ellacuria was also denounced and threatened on a radio station under government control just prior to his assassination. "The house where these tragic events took place is precisely on the university grounds that have been under strict Army control for several days. In addition, we have received reports that at least one eyewitness saw uniformed armed men entering the Jesuit rectory right before the murders. "The victims are Fathers Ignacio Ellacuria, Segundo Montes, Ignacio Martin Baro, Juan Ramon Moreno, Amando Lopez, and Juaquin Lopez y Lopez. The cook is Julia Elba Ramos and her daughter Celina Marisette Ramos. Father Ellacuria was the Rector (President) of the Central American University in San Salvador, and Father Montes was the head of its Human Rights Institute (IDHUCA). "We have also received reports that several other foreign priests have received recent anonymous telephone death threats. "The fact that these murders took place during the Army-imposed curfew, in an area under its total control, is reminiscent of the thousands of death-squad-type murders that took place in El Salvador in the early 1980's. Most of those murders also took place during the curfew. Although at first the Reagan Administration insisted on blaming some vaguely identified "right wing" elements for them, it became clear over time that the Salvadoran Army was responsible for the vast majority of those murders. We believe that the circumstances of this case create a very grave presumption that the Army of El Salvador is responsible for last night's assassinations as well. "It is imperative that the United States take firm and immediate measures to prevent any further executions. We call upon the United States to denounce these killings and to insist on punishment of the soldiers responsible, including the officers who commanded the unit which committed this crime. As a strongly symbolic first step, we suggest that a high-ranking emissary such as Vice-President Quayle or you personally attend the funeral of these courageous priests, to express the grief of the American people over the loss of such valuable lives for El Salvador and for Latin America. Your presence or that of the Vice-President on such an occasion would also signal the Bush Administration's unequivocal condemnation of these cowardly murders. "Delivery of military assistance in the pipeline for El Salvador was suspended when the US churchwomen were killed. To underscore the significance of United States concern about these murders, it is essential that the US suspend delivery of all lethal military aid to the Government of El Salvador pending a full investigation of these killings and other abuses that have occurred during the last week, and pending apprehension and prosecution of those responsible. "We also call upon the US Government publicly to express its concern for the safety of other church and human rights figures who have received threats in recent days, and offer safe haven to those at risk. "Thank you for your attention to this important matter. Sincerely, Aryeh Neier Juan E. Mendez Executive Director Americas Watch Americas Watch [Basic data from several reports by AP, 11/16/89, 11/17/89; Reuters, 11/16/89; Notimex, 11/16/89, 11/17/89; Radio Venceremos, 11/16/89; AFP, 11/16/89; Americas Watch (Washington, DC), 11/16/89]

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