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El Salvador: Witness To Nov. 16 Slayings Of Jesuit Priests Provides Sworn Testimony

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Nov. 24, head of the Jesuit order in Central America, Jose Maria Tojeira, identified a witness to the Nov. 16 slayings of the six Jesuit priests and two women on the campus of the University of Central America as Lucia Barrera Cerna. Jesuit officials said the woman left the country on Nov. 23 for Miami. While in the US, she is under protection of the FBI. The investigating judge, Ricardo A. Zamorra, took Barrera's statement Nov. 22 at the Spanish Embassy, where she hid until fleeing El Salvador. On Nov. 27, her statement was made available to journalists. Barrera, a 44-year-old cleaning woman who lived nearby, said she was awakened by gunfire at about 1 a.m., and ran to a window. In "moonlight that was like daytime," she reported seeing five uniformed men close in, shooting, on the residence the six Jesuits shared across the way. Two assailants wore camouflage, she said, like the uniforms "I have seen on the soldiers in the street," and the others were clad in dark uniforms. She heard doors flung open and more shots, then "voices, without being able to distinguish who spoke at first. Only the voice of Padre Nachito (Ignacio Martin-Baro) was I finally able to hear. He was saying: 'What an injustice. What carnage.'" After a burst of gunfire, "Padre Nachito spoke no more, nor could I hear a single voice," she said. A few seconds later, Barrera heard furniture crashing and glass breaking. She said she left the window and rushed to tell her husband what she had seen, "crying for what I imagined might have happened, because I couldn't hear the padre." A few minutes later she heard an explosion, then another. "After the explosions...I heard no footsteps, no sound, nothing that told me where they had gone. It seemed as though they had fallen from the sky." When dawn came, the terrified woman said, she emerged and found the bodies of four priests, including Martin-Baro, vice-rector of the university, and the Rev. Ignacio Ellacuria, the rector, sprawled on the lawn with their faces destroyed. The others were inside the residence, which was ransacked and pocked by bullets. "I don't discount any possibility; it's probably members of the military," said Zamorra. In a 20-minute interview with the New York Times in San Salvador in his office, Zamorra said, "It's logical." He noted that the killers were able to travel during a dusk-to-dawn curfew that is strictly enforced by the armed forces and that army units surrounded the area at the time of the slayings. Zamorra said investigators had collected a large amount of forensic evidence, including shell casings, boot and shoe imprints, and fingerprints. The evidence should help in identifying the gunmen. Salvadorans are fingerprinted when they obtain their national identity card as well as when they join the armed forces. (Basic data from AP, 11/24/89, 11/27/89; New York Times, 11/28/89)

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