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El Salvador: U.S. Church Worker Arrested; Army Says Jennifer Casolo Stashed "large Arsenal" For Rebels

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Nov. 26, Salvadoran Army special forces, accompanied by US Embassy personnel, captured US citizen Jennifer Casolo at her residence northwest of San Salvador. Two Salvadorans were taken into custody at the same time. According to military sources, Casolo is accused of stashing a "large arsenal" for the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). Soldiers said they found 40,000 rounds of ammunition for Soviet-made AK-47s, 40,000 rounds for M-16 rifles, blocks of plastic explosives, electronic timers, two dozen 60-millimeter mortar shells, and 400 detonating capsules used to make explosives at her house and several other locations. Casolo, 28, is a representative of Christian Education Seminars, an ecumenical group based in San Antonio, Texas. She is well-known to the Salvadoran government and to US officials, including members of Congress, whom she escorted on tours in El Salvador. She was briefly shown to reporters gathered in the central courtyard of the downtown police headquarters. Casolo, who until recently was staying in a downtown hotel, remained expressionless while standing erect. In the courtyard in front of her, the police laid out the arms that they said they found buried under her house. Casolo's friends noted that her arrest came during a crackdown by the army and the government on religious and relief workers. They said they could not believe she would knowingly allow weapons to be stored in her house, and accused the police of planting the weapons to justify the arrest. Friends of Casolo said she had just moved into the house and that she had complained of being under surveillance. The weapons appeared to be old and to have been buried for some time, providing support to the supposition that she might not have been aware of the cache on the property. National Police chief Col. Alejandro Sanchez Paredes said the evidence was overwhelming and incontrovertible. He said the police had been tipped off to the cache by a rebel deserter. Sanchez did not permit journalists to talk to the deserter. Sanchez said Casolo would be held for investigation for 15 days and, if the evidence warranted, turned over to the judicial authorities. Under the state-of-siege imposed after the rebels launched their offensive Nov. 11, security forces have up to 15 days to file charges or release someone instead of the normal 72 hours. Americas Watch criticized US officials for presuming Casolo was guilty and for failing to actively defend her. Susana Wallace, a spokesperson for the Christian Education Seminars, said in a telephone interview from San Antonio with the New York Times that the Salvadoran government's charges against Jennifer Casolo were "absolutely false." Casolo has been in El Salvador for four years. Wallace said she is a graduate of Brandeis University and was raised in Thomaston, Connecticut. Wallace said Christian Education Seminars is a four-year-old nonpartisan, non-denominational organization that "provides religious and congressional groups a view of the reality of El Salvador." The Times stated that there are dozens of foreign and local relief and humanitarian groups attempting to provide assistance to Salvadorans displaced, homeless and otherwise hurt by the war, and to focus international attention on the widespread repression characterizing the conflict. Although many have provided food and shelter to the rebels, there is no credible independent evidence that they have gone beyond their humanitarian role. Nov. 27: Audrey Casolo, Jennifer Casolo's mother, told reporters that her daughter's arrest was part of a scheme by the Salvadoran government to justify its attacks against

church organizations. Nov. 28: The US Justice Department said it was investigating whether Casolo had violated the US Neutrality Act. Sen. Christopher Dodd complained that the Bush administration appeared to have confirmed Casolo's guilt. White House spokesperson Marlin Fitzwater said: "There are indications of her involvement. That's for certain. It's fairly clear that these weapons were found there. We're not talking about a small package of pistols here. We're talking about tons of equipment and mortars and dynamite and rounds of ammunition and explosives...This is hardly the case of someone having a few things flipped in their shopping bag on the way home." (Basic data from AP, AFP, 11/26-28/89; New York Times, Notimex, 11/27/89)

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