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Americas Watch Accuses Bush Administration Of Attempting To Cover Up Salvadoran Government Abuses

by Deborah Tyroler

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In a report released Nov. 26, Americas Watch accused the Bush administration of trying to downplay or distort evidence of abuses by the Salvadoran military during the previous two weeks to justify continued US aid to the Salvadoran government. The report also criticizes guerrilla forces for abuses, but most of its criticism involved actions by the Salvadoran army and government. "The urban offensive of November 1989 has put the Bush administration once again in the awkward position of defending the indefensible," the report states. Asserting that the Salvadoran security forces have committed "unspeakable abuses" before and during the offensive, Americas Watch argues that the US must hold President Alfredo Cristiani responsible for the military's actions or abandon its claim that he represents authentic leadership. "If he is in fact powerless to exert any meaningful control over [the armed forces], then the Bush administration's fiction that the US supports a legitimate government is really no more than a thin veil to cover up its support of a murderous military." In support of the conclusions, the study details cases of abuses ranging from arbitrary detention to torture and murder. The report was compiled from press reports and investigations in El Salvador since the offensive began. The report denounces what it describes as a significant increase in repression against opposition and church organizations "as the government forces apparently took advantage of the fighting to settle old scores." Included are documented cases of detention, torture and deportations of several foreign volunteers working for progressive and humanitarian organizations. The treatment of Salvadorans involved in the same organizations at the hands of the security forces is worse, said the report, which provides details of many of these cases as well. Americas Watch also criticizes the rebels for abuses ranging from the use of civilians as a military shield to the slaying of informers and attacks against hospitals. The report accuses US diplomats of ignoring what it calls "overwhelming" circumstantial evidence pointing to the culpability of the Salvadoran armed forces in human rights violations. Americas Watch said US officials made a "dismal" response to the Nov. 16 assassinations of six prominent Jesuit priests at their home on a university campus in San Salvador. "Every statement by the Bush administration and by its congressional allies include also shameful attempts to disguise or to ignore the overwhelming evidence that the armed forces of El Salvador either were responsible directly for the crime or deliberately and coldly made it happen," the report states. Evidence pointing to military involvement, said the report, includes testimony by witnesses that the scene of the killing had been controlled and under close surveillance by the army for several days before the crime. The report notes that the killing was committed during curfew hours in which soldiers were known to be patrolling the campus, that the priests' offices had been searched by soldiers two days earlier and that the priests had been threatened over a government-controlled radio station days before their deaths. Americas Watch said that "the political space opened up since the August 1987 signing of the Central American peace plan, which allowed the return to El Salvador of prominent politicians, has slammed shut, as those same politicians have been forced into exile or hiding by death threats." The FMLN is criticized for launching the offensive from poor neighborhoods and not permitting

residents to evacuate exposed them to serious danger. (Basic data from Notimex, New York Times, 11/27/89)

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