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U.S. Citizen Jennifer Casolo Opts For Trial In El Salvador Instead Of Deportation

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Nov. 26 Jennifer Casolo of Thomaston, Conn., was arrested in San Salvador after security forces said they found a rebel arms cache under her home. (See CAU 11/29/89.) She worked for the Texas-based Christian Education Seminars, a religious group that organized visits to the country in the hope of encouraging changes in US policies toward Central America. Casolo's friends said she took no sides in the war and pursued her beliefs by functioning as an extraordinary tour guide in a war zone. "She was very neutral and never took a position in favor of any side or ever tried to convince us of a point of view," said Melford Pearson, an Indiana businessperson who toured the country with Casolo in 1986. "She did not seem politically motivated but she did seem very young and very moved by the suffering she saw around her." According to the New York Times, several people who traveled with her, including congressional aides and a university professor, said Casolo maintained good relations with politicians of both the left and the right, with peasant groups and military officers. A summa cum laude of Brandeis University, she was a skilled translator and guide who set up appointments and accompanied visitors. James McGovern, a spokesperson for Rep. Joe Moakley (D-Mass.), said she provided "not political interpretation but logistical assistance." The Bush administration appears to have accepted the charges against Casolo by the Salvadoran military. On Nov. 28, Sen. Christopher J. Dodd (D-CT), said, "I am outraged by comments attributed to US government officials in the last 48 hours that assert or even imply Jennifer Casolo is guilty of anything." Arguing that the Bush administration was denying her the presumption of innocence, Dodd said comments on the case by administration officials were "unwarranted, prejudicial and irresponsible." Former attorney general Ramsey Clark said Nov. 27 that he had been retained by Casolo's family and employers and that he intended to go to El Salvador as soon as he received a visa. Several of Casolo's friends said that she was innocent and that she had been framed as part of a campaign by the government to intimidate church workers. Dan Long, a Lutheran pastor who is chairperson of Christian Education Seminars' board, said, "Historically, the Salvadoran military has repressed church groups in order to spread terror and to discredit the churches, especially the Catholic Church, as defenders of human rights and as defenders of the refugees and the poor." Although Casolo was hired by a variety of organizations and individuals to conduct visits to El Salvador, her primary work was for Christian Education Seminars. John Blatz, director of the group, which has two paid staff members at its San Antonio headquarters and two, including Casolo, in San Salvador, described it as "non-partisan, nonviolent and ecumenical." Friends in El Salvador, who asked not to be identified by name, described Casolo as "a touch naive," as "idealistic, not ideological," and as a person who did not come from "a heavy political background." Nov. 29: Sen. Christopher Dodd said Ramsey Clark had finally obtained a visa and would soon travel to El Salvador. Salvadoran officials in Washington appeared reluctant to facilitate Clark's rapid arrival in San Salvador. Casolo's family appealed to Dodd for his direct intervention to obtain a visa for Clark. Dec. 3: In San Salvador, Clark told reporters that Casolo had decided to stand trial in the case rather than be deported. He said that even with a good lawyer, "it would be extremely difficult if not impossible" for Casolo to get a fair trial amid the pressure of war and the near paranoia about

foreigners in El Salvador. Clark is not licensed to practice law in El Salvador. He said he had hoped Casolo would agree to be deported rather than tried but that is not the case. He added, "Every heart has to be somewhere and her heart chose El Salvador. She doesn't want to go home." The attorney said Casolo has begun a ministry inside the jail where she has been held since her arrest. The Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) has denied any connection with Casolo. Dec. 5: Late Tuesday Casolo was charged with terrorism. She spent more than four hours behind closed doors making a sworn deposition to military Judge Guillermo Romero. When she emerged from the judge's chambers, she said, "I'm being taken to the women's prison. It's a place I've taken many delegations, a place where I've interviewed many prisoners. I guess now I'll be on the other side." Casolo and her lawyer, Salvador Ibarra, said she had been charged under the terrorism law with possession of weapons of war. She faces up to 20- ears in prison if convicted. Casolo has said she rented the house where the munitions were found only three months ago, and that she has been traveling much of that time. "I have faith in all the people who have written me letters, in their prayers. I can't say I have faith in the system to find me innocent. But I believe my innocence will shine through," she said before being driven off to prison. (Basic data from New York Times, 11/29/89; Notimex, 11/30/89; 12/05/89; AP, 12/03/89; 12/05/89)

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