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Deborah Tyroler

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Salvadoran Archbishop Says Witness To Massacre Of Jesuits Subjected To Aggressive & Violent Interrogation

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Dec. 10 during his traditional homily, Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas said Lucia Barrera de Cerna, the only witness to the Nov. 16 massacre of the Jesuit priests who has come forward to testify, had been brainwashed and blackmailed by FBI agents. He said Barrera de Cerna was subjected to "aggressive and violent" interrogation. She was removed to the US on Nov. 23 after providing a deposition in El Salvador. Rivera y Damas said, "Instead of being protected, as was promised by the US Embassy in El Salvador, the witness Lucia Barrera de Cerna was subjected in that country to an authentic brainwashing and to the blackmail that she would be deported if she did not tell the truth. According to a New York attorney working with the Jesuits, Scott Greathead, the interrogation to which the witness was subjected was aggressive and violent. After this psychological torment, Barrera de Cerna vacillated and retracted what she had said in El Salvador. But fortunately, once again free from the pressure of her 'protectors'...she has returned to the hallways of truth." [At a news conference on Dec. 9, President Alfredo Cristiani offered a \$250,000 reward for information leading to the prosecution and conviction of the Jesuits' killers. He asserted that Barrera de Cerna's original testimony was false and she had been discredited as a witness. On the same day, Attorney General Mauricio Colorado named a priest as a member of a team investigating the Nov. killings of the Jesuits.] Rivera y Damas dismissed Colorado's gesture. He said the priest had been forbidden to sit on the commission, and added, "It could be a trick." Sources close to the US investigation, who spoke to AP on condition of anonymity, said the witness was given six lie detector tests in three days at the FBI offices in Miami, provided three different versions of events and failed all six tests. The Rev. Paul S. Tipton, president of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, was cited by the New York Times as saying that a group for the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights had conducted two long interviews with Barrera de Cerna, and that the Committee believes her original deposition. In a letter to Secretary of State James Baker, Tipton said the Lawyers Committee "found the witness's testimony completely credible." The New York Times (12/11/89) cited an FBI spokesperson, Kathleen Kennedy, who said she would not confirm the report of the failed lie detector test. Dec. 11: President George Bush denied that the Salvadoran woman had been intimidated while in US protective custody into recanting testimony. He said the Justice Department would not permit the kind of "inquisition process" that was reported and he insisted that the results of the investigation would be handled properly. According to Notimex, the US Catholic Conference and the spokespersons for the Jesuit order in the US echoed Greathead's denunciations. The US Church has criticized the Bush administration's response to the assassination of the Jesuits, and the Salvadoran military's campaign of aggression and hostility against Catholic clergy and laypersons active in Church relief efforts. (Basic data from AP, 12/10/89; Notimex, 12/10/89, 12/11/89; AFP, 12/11/89; New York Times, 12/11/89)

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