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Salvadoran President: Military Personnel Responsible For Nov. 16 Murders Of Six Jesuit Priests

by Deborah Tyroler

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Jan. 7: On Sunday evening, President Alfredo Cristiani announced that military men committed the Nov. 16 massacre of six Jesuit priests and two women at their residence on the campus of the Jesuit-run Central American University. In a brief address broadcast over radio and television, Cristiani said, "It has been determined there was involvement of some elements of the armed forces" in the killings. He did not provide details. Cristiani said a "Special Commission of Honor," including high-ranking military men and civilian lawyers, had been created to expose the truth about the Nov. 16 massacre "in its complete magnitude." The president said the commission would work with investigators to "make sure justice is done" and promised punishment would be meted out "down to the last person implicated." Cristiani has also offered a \$250,000 reward for information leading to the murderers' arrest and conviction. Earlier Sunday evening, Col. Rene Emilio Ponce, head of the joint chiefs of staff, said 47 members of the elite Atlactl battalion, including two officers, had been confined to base and were being questioned in connection with the slayings. None of them had been arrested or formally charged. Citing confidential sources, Radio YSK reported that Salvadoran authorities, with the assistance of US, British and Spanish law enforcement agencies, had arrested a group of people in connection with the killings. Jan. 8: Christian Democrat party secretary general, Fidel Chavez Mena, said announcement was extremely important for the country's juridical and political future. He added that clarification of the Nov. 16 events "would represent... opening a new process in international relations with the world community" for the Salvadoran government. Jan. 9: FMLN Cmdr. Roberto Canas, a member of the political diplomatic commission, described Cristiani's announcement as a "manipulative maneuver" to eventually close the case of the Jesuits' murders. Canas said blaming lower-ranking military personnel for the murders "cannot be the result of a serious and honest investigation," because it suggests that decisions of this type can be taken by foot soldiers. The spokesperson stated that Cristiani's government seeks only to implement repairs to its international image, and has responded to pressure from abroad. Nothing fundamental has changed. Canas reiterated that establishing democracy in El Salvador requires demilitarization of the society in order prevent atrocities such as the one of Nov. 16. Americas Watch said, "The Cristiani government's admission of military involvement is an important and salutary development." Noting that there have been no indictments or arrests, the group said the Bush Administration must "maintain sufficient pressure to see that all those responsible are tried and punished." Anne Manuel, research director of Americas Watch, said the Atlactl battalion was implicated in the 1981 massacre of more than 700 peasants in Morazan department. It has also been accused in the killings of at least 68 people in Cabanas department in 1984 and the massacre of at least 50 in Chalatenango department in 1984. Manuel said that the battalion's record cast doubt on "the theory promoted by successive US administrations that US training brings about improved human rights behavior." Rev. Francisco Estrada, who replaced the slain Ignacio Ellacuria as rector at the university, said Cristiani "only confirmed what we have said from the beginning. We need something more complete." According to the New York Times (01/09/90), congressional Democrats are preparing to link progress in the investigation with continued US aid to El Salvador. Cristiani's

announcement was perceived to be the result of US pressure. Since the civil war began 10 years ago, not a single military officer has been convicted of a politically motivated slaying. (Basic data from AFP, 01/07/90; AP, Notimex, 01/08/90; Xinhua, New York Times, 01/09/90)

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