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El Salvador: Nine Soldiers Designated As Suspects In Nov. 16 Massacre Of Jesuit Priests

by Deborah Tyroler

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In a nationally broadcast address, President Alfredo Cristiani said eight members of the armed forces have been arrested for the Nov. 16 massacre of the Jesuit priests. A ninth soldier, a private, deserted from the military last month, and is a fugitive. Among those arrested was Col. Guillermo Alfredo Benavides Moreno, director of the Gerardo Barrios Military College, and until last year was head of the intelligence section of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The other officers implicated by Cristiani are Lt. Yuzi Mendoza, Lt. Jose Espinosa Guerra and 2nd Lt. Gonzalo Guevara. All are members of the elite Atlacatl infantry battalion. The enlisted men named by Cristiani were Sgt. Antonio Avalos, Sgt. Tomas Castillo, Cpl. Angel Perez, Pvt. Oscar Amaya and Pvt. Jorge Sierra, the deserter. Cristiani did not say specifically that the eight suspects had been arrested, but unidentified sources close to the investigation cited by AP said the men were indeed under arrest. They have not yet been charged. In the past 10 years, no military officer has been convicted of a human rights abuse crime. In a statement released in Mexico City, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) said they doubted the "intellectual authors" of the killings of the priests and the slaying of a prominent politician in Guatemala would be brought to justice. They said Cristiani was putting on an act prior to his upcoming visit to the US. The new developments, said the FMLN, have caused the rebels to "review" their offer for a dialogue made on Jan. 11. "We are not interested in helping the fascist regime wash its face to seek US military aid and further its plan of annihilating all types of opposition," the statement said. Jan. 14: In a Sunday homily, Msgr. Gregorio Rosa Chavez, San Salvador's auxiliary bishop, praised Cristiani's efforts to prosecute those responsible for murdering the priests, but said much more remains to be done to end the cycle of violence. "Now that Mr. Cristiani has made public the names of those implicated, the possibility that El Salvador will regain confidence in its institutions has grown...[However], it's not enough to punish some. It is necessary to completely revise the criteria to define who are really enemies of the people and enemies of the nation." Rosa Chavez said that it was "difficult to accept" that only a handful of military men "who have blemished the honor of the military" was responsible for the killings. "We don't think these are isolated cases of individuals diverging from the institution. Rather, this corresponds to a way of thinking, to a training in which the work of those who were assassinated is seen...as something which goes against state security...We know that the military world misunderstands the Church's mission, especially in promoting and defending human rights. The bishop pointed out that during a nationwide offensive by the FMLN in November, the army-controlled radio network broadcast statements in favor of killing priests. After his homily, Rosa Chavez said he hoped UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar would be able to assist peace talks between the FMLN and the government. He said he feared, however, that the recent killing of Salvadoran opposition leader Hector Oqueli by a death squad in Guatemala might adversely affect resumption of the talks. The New York Times reported Sunday that a US officer and a second Salvadoran colonel were being questioned about the case. Quoting unidentified officials, the Times said the two officers may have had advance knowledge of plans to kill the priests. Jan. 15: The New York Times reported that unidentified officials at the Defense and State Departments said there was no evidence the

US officer had advance knowledge of plans to kill the priests. They said that after the killings had occurred in November, the officer heard reports of the involvement of Col. Benavides and had given this information to US authorities, who shared it with the Salvadoran government. Jan. 16: The seven suspects appeared before civilian Judge Ricardo Zamora of the 4th Penal Court to make statements. The judge has 72 hours to decide if there is enough evidence to charge the men and hold them for trial. The suspects have been under arrest at several unidentified military and police garrisons in the capital. President Cristiani told ABC-TV's "Good Morning America" that Benavides denies ordering the slayings. "But the junior officers involved expressly have testified that they received a direct order from him," he said. According to Cristiani, the soldiers will likely be charged by Wednesday. Cristiani dismissed the possibility of a coup d'etat because of alleged rifts within the military and insisted that talks with his top commanders showed that they fully supported the investigation into the slayings. (Basic data from Notimex, AP, AFP, 01/13-16/90; New York Times, 01/14/90, 01/15/90)

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