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Two Human Rights Monitors On U.S. Role In El Salvador

by Deborah Tyroler

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[Appearing below are highlights and excerpts from an article by James A. Goldston and Anne Manuel, titled, "Are We Shielding the Killers of Salvador's Priests?", appearing in the 01/21/90 issue of the New York Times. Goldston is a research fellow at Human Rights Watch; Manuel is a research director of Americas Watch.] * The soldiers charged with the murder of the six Jesuit priests and two women on Nov. 16 were members of the so-called elite Atlacatl Battalion. The Atlacatl Battalion was created by US Special Forces training in 1981. * After the killings, US officials dismissed evidence indicating military responsibility for the crime. As recently as Jan. 2, Ambassador William Walker told congressional investigators there was no evidence to implicate the military. He also asserted, without foundation, that members of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) might have committed the act while dressed in soldier's garb. * "Now we learn that a US Army major was told in December by a Salvadoran colonel, Carlos Armando Aviles, that the military was responsible. If US officials are to be believed, the major inexplicably kept this to himself for 10 days. When our embassy finally passed on the crucial information to the Salvadorans, it endangered Aviles by revealing his name, which led to his detention. "When another Salvadoran source ventured forward with evidence, the response of US officials was once again punitive. Lucia Barrera de Cerna, who witnessed the assault, was whisked off to Miami for four days of abusive questioning and threats of deportation by US agents and a Salvadoran colonel after Ambassador Walker had offered her 'protection' in the US..The treatment of Ms. Cerna and Col. Aviles has sent an unmistakable message to all Salvadorans with information about this or any crime committed by the military: Steer clear of the American embassy. "Eight military men including Colonel Guillermo Alfredo Benavides, who is in charge of the military's school, have now been charged in the crime. But legitimate questions exist about the likelihood and extent of Colonel Benavides' involvement. The killers of the priests surely knew their act would jeopardize the...government. Colonel Benavides, however, was not previously associated with extremists in the army or notorious human rights abuses. There is a strong suspicion that he is being served up to protect others and to satisfy demands for a senior officer. "For years we have been told that US training would improve human rights behavior by creating a more disciplined, professional army. Yet in 1981, the battalion massacred 700 peasants in El Mozote. In 1983, it killed dozens of villagers from Tenancingo and Copapayo. In 1984, it slaughtered 68 in the hamlet of Los Llanitos and 40 in Gualsinga River. Last summer, it joined Salvador's First Brigade in torturing two young men who later died. Now it has slain six priests and two women... "At the very least, the Atlacatl Battalion must be dissolved and its officers cashiered as a signal to the entire military that human rights violations will not be tolerated. "Ten years after the still unsolved murder of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, priests are again targets of violence in El Salvador. But, sadly, the assassinations of the Jesuits are only the most notorious of numerous abuses committed by soldiers since the launching of a fierce offensive by leftist guerrillas in November. "Indeed, the pervasive pattern of violations belies the notion that a few rogue bands are responsible for the continuing terror. President Cristiani has yet to utter a word about other atrocities committed by the military. Congress must demand prosecutions and a wholesale clean up of the armed forces, to replace commanders who authorized or ignored these

abuses. "If this cannot be accomplished, then Washington must abandon all pretense of standing for human rights in El Salvador."

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