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El Salvador: Former Defense Minister Testifies In Jesuit Murder Case

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Sept. 4, in testimony before Judge Ricardo Zamora, former defense minister Gen. Rafael Humberto Larios denied that a meeting held on the evening of Nov. 15, 1989, had anything to do with the assassinations of six Jesuit priests and two women carried out a short time later. Larios said that in addition to 24 military officers, President Alfredo Cristiani was present at the meeting. The meeting was adjourned at 2 a.m., and the murders were committed shortly thereafter. According to Larios' testimony, the officers met to plan strategies to counter the guerrilla offensive, which had paralyzed San Salvador and other parts of the country. Larios said that President Cristiani authorized defensive operations to remove the Farabundo National Liberation Front (FMLN) from rebel-occupied areas. He added that he knew nothing of communiques addressed to commanders of the Atlacatl battalion. Members of the battalion were responsible for the murders. Larios' testimony contradicts earlier statements by three officers defendants in the murder case who affirmed that they received the orders to kill the priests from Col. Benavides, military academy director. Benavides was present at the Nov. 15 meeting. Judge Zamora will require testimony from all 24 military officers present at the Nov. 15 meeting. Defense Minister Col. Rene Emilio Ponce has already testified. Last November, he headed the army high command. Among the officers to be called in for testimony are Col. Carlos Guzman, military attache in Costa Rica, and former director of the national intelligence agency (DNI); and, Col. Leon Linares, commander of a military base in Morazan department, and former deputy commander of the Atlacatl battalion. Zamora continues negotiations with the US Embassy to hear testimony by US military adviser Maj. Eric Buckland. (Basic data from ACAN-EFE, 09/04/90, 09/05/90)

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