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El Salvador: Controversy Over Jesuit Massacre Continues

by Deborah Tyroler

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Nov. 13: In San Salvador, at a forum held on the Central American University (UCA) campus, Jesuit Provincial for Central America Jose Maria Tojeira said the Jesuit order would request that the Legislative Assembly reopen investigations into the November 1989 murders of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter. According to Tojeira, the Jesuits will present the legislature with a report containing evidence which demonstrates that persons responsible for planning the crime have yet to be prosecuted. The order plans to request that both the legislature and executive appoint separate investigatory commissions. Tojeira said the requests are based on constitutional provisions which allow private citizens to request investigation into "important cases which transcend national boundaries." Next, Tojeira said that if the government refuses to reopen the case, "then we'll have to publicly release some clues." According to the provincial, the Jesuits have evidence, and are "prepared to name names." Assembly president Roberto Angulo said granting the Jesuits' request for a legislative investigation would result in further politicization of the case. He added, "The Assembly is a political forum by nature, and [attempts to prosecute] such a crime should remain outside of the political arena." Nov. 15: At least 2,000 persons participated in a candlelight procession through the streets of the capital in commemoration of the second anniversary of the Jesuit massacre. Nov. 16: Jesuit Provincial Tojeira, Archbishop of San Salvador Arturo Rivera y Damas, Auxiliary Bishop Rosa Gregorio Chavez, members of the Jesuit community, foreign observers and members of the international diplomatic corps celebrated an open-air mass at the UCA campus honoring the memory of the slain Jesuit priests. Tojeira told reporters that in early December, evidence concerning persons responsible for the massacre would be turned over the courts. He said, "We do not believe that the country benefits from having the intellectual authors of this crime remain in their positions among the armed forces leadership." He asserted that removal of senior officers implicated in the crime would serve as a purification contributing to the betterment of all Salvadorans. Nov. 17: According to The New York Times, in a six-page report the special US House of Representatives task force on the Jesuit murder case concluded that strong circumstantial evidence implicated senior army officers as the intellectual architects of the murders. The task force is comprised of 19 Democrats, and chaired by Rep. Joe Moakley (D-MA). Moakley said the report was based on statements made by a military officer who attended a secret meeting held at the military academy on the eve of the massacre, and on testimony given by military personnel who were present at the academy. Gen. Juan Rafael Bustillo, then commander of the Air Force, was identified as the mastermind behind the massacre. [Bustillo is presently serving as military attache at the Salvadoran Embassy in Israel.] Others present at the meeting were Defense Minister Gen. Emilio Ponce (then armed forces chief), deputy defense minister Gen. Juan Orlando Zepeda, first infantry brigade commander Col. Francisco Elena Fuentes, and Col. Guillermo Benavides (convicted Sept. 28 for ordering troops under his command to murder the priests). The report notes that in early 1991, the Bush administration was made aware of the secret meeting, but decided to refrain from divulging the information for fear of upsetting the military balance between the Salvadoran army and the rebels. In addition, the report criticized the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) for failing to carry out a thorough investigation. The CIA's failure was motivated by an attempt to avoid recriminations targeting Bustillo, a key collaborator in the US-backed war against the Sandinista
government in Nicaragua. In a telephone interview with the Times, Ponce denied any knowledge of such a plot against the Jesuits and said that he was not present at the military academy on the eve of the killings. Nov. 18: Presidency Minister Oscar Santamaria said President Cristiani has asserted on numerous occasions that if sufficient evidence is presented, the government would be willing to initiate new investigations into the Jesuit massacre. He emphasized that ultimately the courts would have to determine whether such evidence merited additional trials. US State Department spokesperson Richard Boucher told reporters, "The [Moakley] report contains charges but no direct evidence. We urge him or anyone else who may have evidence related to this crime to present it to Salvadoran judicial authorities." Nov. 19: At a press conference, Defense Minister Ponce and deputy minister Zepeda "vehemently" denied accusations that they conspired with other officers to order the Jesuit killings. Ponce said the accusations were the product of "internal political agendas," and criticized Moakley for "his zeal in implicating senior military officers." He accused Moakley of "interfering in the internal affairs of our country and of disrespect for our national dignity," adding that the charges are based "on mere speculation with no evidence." Zepeda said, "If [Moakley] has a source, then let him bring that source forward." A government communique asserted that the US congressional committee report was "completely irresponsible, unsubstantiated and based on speculation by non-impartial individuals." Authors of the report were requested to submit proof implicating high-ranking military officers in the Jesuit murders. Deputy Juan Jose Martell of the Democratic Convergence rejected claims that the Moakley commission was meddling in Salvadoran domestic affairs. He said he found it odd that "those who have allowed US interference during the last 10 years, to the tune of millions of dollars to finance the war, find Rep. Moakley's report an interference." Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) Deputy Raul Somoza Alfaro said the "gringos' speculations have no legal grounds." (Basic data from Salpress, 11/15/91; Spanish news service, 11/17/91; ACAN-EFE, 11/14/91, 11/16/91, 11/18/91, 11/19/91; Agence France-Presse, 11/16-19/91; Associated Press, 11/19/91)