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Guatemala: Archbishop Criticizes Unfair Application Of Death Penalty

by Deborah Tyroler

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On March 5, Archbishop Prospero Penados del Barrio told reporters that the first death penalty ruling since 1983 in the case of Esteban Ajsivinac is objectionable on moral and political grounds. Ajsivinac was convicted of the 1991 murder of agricultural worker Lucas Pu Us. (See CAU 03/06/92.) Penados del Barrio said that in addition to Church opposition to the death penalty on moral grounds, application of justice in Guatemala is clearly influenced by defendants' social status and wealth. In Guatemala and elsewhere, he added, defendants who have money "are acquitted because they buy the judges." Ajsivinac, said the archbishop, "is a poor illiterate indian who has neither the financial means nor the ability to defend himself." Although Ajsivinac committed a "loathsome... crime, in this case it is money and influence which matter." The prelate pointed out that persons responsible for "many far more notorious crimes" have never been prosecuted or received much less onerous sentences. (Basic data from Agencia Centroamericana de Noticias-Spanish news service EFE, 03/05/92)

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