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Salvadoran Soldiers Who Killed Churchwomen in 1980 Say They Acted on Orders

by LADB Staff

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Four of the five Salvadoran National Guard members convicted in 1984 of the murder of three nuns and a lay worker told The New York Times in April that they acted on orders from higher-ups and that they were pressured to participate in a cover-up of the crimes. This was the first time the men had contradicted the official explanation of the crimes subscribed to by the Salvadoran and US governments that they acted alone.

The Salvadoran government has suggested it might reopen the case if the evidence warrants. Two of the victims, Ita Ford and Maura Clark, were members of the Maryknoll Sisters of Ossining, New York, and worked in the northern province of Chalatenango. The other victims, Ursuline sister Dorothy Kazel and lay missionary Jean Donovan, worked with the Diocese of Cleveland's mission in La Libertad.

In interviews with members of the New York-based Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, which represents the victims' families, the four men said they were ordered to kill the women by their immediate superior, Sgt. Luis Colindres Aleman. In a subsequent interview with the Times, the four recounted how, in December 1980, they detained the four women as they drove from the Comalapa International Airport to San Salvador and took them to a remote area.

Colindres returned to the airport where he was seen talking on the telephone to get further orders, one guardsman told the Times during the April interview. "When [Colindres] came back, he said it had all been solved, that the order had been given" to kill the four women, said the guardsman. The four women were then raped and shot. One man said Colindres assured them that the order to kill the nuns came from "higher levels" and "nothing is going to happen to us."

The four men also said that, during the subsequent investigation, military officers told them to deny everything and to say nothing about the involvement of higher-level military personnel. They said members of the official Salvadoran commission appointed to investigate the murders pressured them to go along with the cover-up. The Salvadoran investigation cleared everyone in the military chain of command except the five guardsmen, who were convicted in 1984 and sentenced to 30-year prison terms.

However, a report in 1993 by the UN Truth Commission for El Salvador said that National Guard commander Col. Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova and defense minister Gen. Jose Guillermo Garcia had organized the cover-up. Neither Salvadoran nor US government authorities followed up on the report. Vides Casanova and Garcia were later admitted to the US and reportedly reside in Florida. Since the trial, the US and Salvadoran governments have maintained that the murders were common crimes carried out on the initiative of the five convicted guardsman. The five were twice

refused release under amnesty laws because their crimes were considered nonpolitical. But the case always had a political side because of the timing.

At the time of the murders, the US Congress was debating extending an aid program to channel funds to the right-wing military-backed government then fighting leftist guerrillas. A State Department report later said the murders "did more to inflame the debate over El Salvador in the United States than any other single incident."

Because of the murders, US aid was temporarily cut off and resumed on the condition that the Salvadoran government show concern for human rights by pursuing the case to conviction. Although, from the outset, indications suggested higher-level military officers might have given the orders to kill the four women, officials of the Ronald Reagan administration (1980-1988) sought to exonerate the military as they pressed Congress for resumption of aid.

Before the investigation began, US ambassador to the UN Jeanne Kirkpatrick said she did not think the Salvadoran government was responsible and described the nuns as "political activists" aiding the guerrillas. Secretary of state Alexander Haig told Congress in 1981 that the women might have been killed while attempting to run a military roadblock. A 1983 State Department review of the case concluded that "the evidence of lack of higher involvement is persuasive."

US says decision for reopening the case lies with El Salvador

When asked about the new development, State Department spokesman James Rubin said it was unclear whether the guardsman were telling the truth and that it was up to Salvadoran, not US, authorities to take action. At the time of the trial, however, US involvement in the case was notable.

In 1984, The New York Times reported that the case, from arrest through prosecution of the five suspects, "was a distinctly United States affair." A US lawyer who worked on the case said at the time that "it is an American show. We the lawyers committee representing the [victims'] families, members of Congress, the American Embassy, the Justice Department have nudged [the Salvadoran authorities] and shoved them every step of the way."

Salvadoran military says case is closed

Defense Minister Gen. Jaime Guzman said the case would not be reopened. "There was a jury, which reached a conclusion, declared a sentence, and for us the case is closed," he said. However, President Armando Calderon Sol left open the possibility that the case might be reviewed to see if others were implicated in the murders. "We are going to analyze the case and consider the juridical aspects," the president said. "If our legal system permits it, we will initiate an investigation."

At the same time, Calderon Sol said he hoped it would be possible to forget the case and "to put the rancor and pain behind us." The Catholic Church and human rights organizations in El Salvador are pressing to have the case reopened. Following publication of the Times article, Maria Julia Hernandez, director of the archdiocesan legal office in San Salvador, said the defense minister's statement shows that "open impunity continues in this country." Leaders of the former guerrilla force Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) are also pressing to have

the case reopened. "We never doubted that [the murders] resulted from superior orders because the National Guard committed massive atrocities in line with a policy of crushing discontent and rebellion," said FMLN congressional leader Schafik Handal. "Those orders came from the army high command."

The five guardsman are eligible for early release after having served 17 years of their 30-year sentences. Under a newly revised penal code, convicts who serve half their sentence with good behavior may be released. [Sources: Agence France-Presse, 04/06/98; The New York Times, 12/07/80, 05/25/84, 04/03/98, 04/08/98; Reuters, 04/22/98; Associated Press, 04/23/98; The Miami Herald, 04/04/98, 04/23/98; Spanish news service EFE, 04/03/98, 04/24/98]

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