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LADB Staff

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Contra Remains Found

by LADB Staff

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Forensic anthropologists are in the process of exhuming remains from clandestine graves on a US-built base in eastern Honduras. Human rights activists expect to find some of the bodies of those killed by the military during the armed conflicts of the 1980s, but so far only the remains of contras have been identified. In 1993, human rights ombud Leo Valladares issued a report entitled *The Facts Speak for Themselves* (*Los hechos hablan por si mismos*), in which he said the Honduran military had killed 184 leftists and others. Besides Hondurans, the list of disappeared includes 39 Nicaraguans, 28 Salvadorans, five Costa Ricans, and two US nationals (see *NotiSur*, 1994-01-07).

In late August, human remains were found buried at the former El Aguacate base near the Nicaraguan border east of Tegucigalpa. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) used the base for training US-sponsored contra forces for attacks on the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua during the 1980s. The site has been under examination since the base was turned over to Honduras in 1994. Three bodies were found there in 1999. Human rights groups in Honduras and Nicaragua suspect that the burial site may yield remains of as many as 80 of the disappeared. Also thought to be buried there are members of a guerrilla column that entered Honduras in 1983 and was wiped out by Honduran forces.

Melvin Duarte, a spokesman for the attorney general's office, said there might be as many as 48 graves sites where the Honduran military buried both disappeared leftists and members of the contra forces. Among the Sandinista sympathizers believed to be buried on the base are James Carney, a US-born priest, and Honduran doctor Jose Maria Reyes Matta, who led the ill-fated 1983 incursion. The initial find in August consisted of three sets of remains. Additional bodies were found within a few days bringing the total to 28. Duarte said that none of the 184 disappeared were among the bodies found on the base. Though identification was not complete, Duarte said the remains were most likely those of contras treated in the base hospital.

Forensic experts identified only the remains of Francisco Guzman, a contra whose plane was downed by Sandinista forces. Ten others have been partially identified. Liduvina Hernandez, head of the *Comite de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras* (COFADEH), agreed that the remains were not those of the disappeared. She said that additional excavations would begin next year in the northeastern province of Olancho, another place where Carney and others might be buried.

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