

RELEASE

OPHM 5-1

Synopsis of Investigation of Jesuits Killing

- Six Jesuit priests (faculty at the Central American University (UCA)), their cook and her daughter found murdered at the UCA on November 16, 1989; President Cristiani immediately condemns killings and pledges prompt, full investigation.
- Investigation by the U.S.-trained and -equipped Special Investigative Unit (SIU) begins immediately; at Cristiani's request, FBI provides technical support and reviews investigative effort. British and Spanish police officials also review investigative effort, find it professional.
- Jesuits' housekeeper, reportedly a witness to the killings, surfaced on November 22. She is interviewed in the U.S. by FBI investigators and the head of the SIU. Her testimony pointed to military involvement, but was not case-breaking. Cristiani publicly discredits her testimony. American Jesuits sharply criticize U.S. handling of the witness, accuse U.S. of encouraging Cristiani to discredit her testimony.
- SIU investigation focuses on military involvement, conducting ballistics and fingerprint tests and handwriting analysis, and interviewing members of the military. Investigation centers on a unit of the Atlacatl Battalion.
- A U.S. advisor to the Salvadoran military tells his superiors on January 2 that a Salvadoran colonel told him third-hand information that Colonel Benavides, the head of the Salvadoran military school, had admitted involvement in the killings. U.S. officials inform the Salvadoran high command.
- On January 9, President Cristiani announces that 47 military personnel have been identified as having been involved in the crime. On January 13, a military honor board announced that Colonel Benavides, three lieutenants, and four enlisted men had been arrested in connection with the crime. The only evidence against Benavides was the testimony of the lieutenants, which is inadmissible under Salvadoran law. The investigative phase of the judicial proceeding was begun.
- The investigation has proceeded slowly. The judge in the case has not subpoenaed essential evidence, nor has he directed the SIU to continue the investigation into possible involvement by more senior military officers.
- The Speaker's Task Force, headed by Rep Moakley, issued an interim report on April 30. It indicated a failure to investigate involvement by more senior officers. The report said that the investigation was stalled, and cited the problems with the evidence against Colonel Benavides.

-- In early May, Cristiani directed the SIU to intensify the investigation. The judge requested several logbooks from the military, but was told they could not be found. We encouraged him, the Salvadoran military, and Cristiani to press hard to obtain the necessary evidence and to follow up on unpursued leads.

-- In July, one of the accused lieutenants and the archivist at the military academy (who was in charge of the logbooks) stated that former deputy military academy chief then-Major Carlos Camilo Hernandez had ordered the destruction of the logbooks indicating the entries and exits of officers into the military academy on the night of the crime. Hernandez denies the charges and is arrested on suspicion of destruction of evidence. He is bailed out of prison and resumes his duties.

-- A sergeant, one of the other 47 members of the Atlacatl who participated in the killings, is brought before the judge to testify in August. He flees the proceedings, but is later brought back to the judge's chambers. He is charged with perjury and placed under military detention.

-- At the August round of U.N.-mediated peace talks, the FMLN accused Cristiani of direct involvement in the killing of the Jesuits because he authorized the November 13 search of the UCA by elements of the Atlacatl. Cristiani testified before the judge for four hours on September 7.

-- On August 15, Chairman Moakley of the Speaker's Task Force released another interim report indicating that he believed that "the high command of the Salvadoran armed forces is engaged in a conspiracy to obstruct justice in the Jesuits case."

-- On August 20, President Cristiani, Supreme Court President Gutierrez Castro, Minister of Defense Larios, and the military high command (Cols Ponce, Rubio, Zepeda and Montano) visited the judge to reiterate their commitment to getting to the bottom of the case.

-- Since taking office as Minister of Defense on September 3, Colonel Ponce has:

-- installed a hotline between his office and that of the judge;

-- provided the judge with a list of all available military academy logbooks; and,

-- given the judge a list of all officers at the November 15 meeting of the high command (during which the killings were reportedly planned) and established a timetable for those officers to testify before the judge.