

25th Anniversary of El Salvador Jesuit Murders

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Commemorative drawings of the victims of the 1989 massacre at UCA (Photo: Steve Rhodes, 2009)

Washington, DC. – Twenty five years have passed since the horrifying murders in El Salvador of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter, during a rampage by Salvadoran security forces in the early morning hours of November 16, 1989, on the campus of the University of Central America (UCA) in the country's capital. It has been twenty five years of grieving by the victims' families and the Jesuit community; and twenty five years of waiting for justice to identify and prosecute the killers.

As they have done on so many other anniversaries of the brutal crime, thousands of Salvadorans and international visitors gathered in San Salvador to commemorate the lives of Father Ignacio Ellacuría Bescoetxea, UCA's rector at the time of his assassination; Father Ignacio Martín-Baró; Father Segundo Montes; Father Armando López; Father Juan Ramón Moreno; Father Joaquín López y López; Julia Elba Ramos and her 13-year-old child Celina Maricet Ramos.

But this year's anniversary is a little different. Although the perpetrators have yet to be brought to trial for their role in planning and ordering the crime, human rights lawyers at the San Francisco-based Center for Justice and Accountability (CJA) believe they are closer than ever to achieving some measure of justice. A case that CJA opened in 2008 before the Spanish National Court under the principle of universal jurisdiction is inching forward, with presiding [Judge Eloy Velásquez ruling just over a month ago to continue prosecuting the Jesuit killings](#), despite the reluctance of the Spanish Parliament to allow Spain to pursue international human rights cases. [Velásquez has indicted twenty senior members of El Salvador's military for planning, ordering, or participating in the crime](#).

The National Security Archive has spent the past quarter of a century collecting declassified US documents on El Salvador, including the Jesuit murders. [Hundreds of those documents have been entered as evidence into CJA's Spanish case](#). Thousands are published in two [Digital National Security Archive collections](#). Today, in commemoration of the deaths, the Archive posts ten documents written by US officials on the day of the murders and during the week that followed.

Taken together, the documents indicate the striking initial unwillingness on the part of the United States to acknowledge the possibility that its closest Central American ally — the Salvadoran armed forces — may have been behind the atrocity. Despite overwhelming evidence of the Army's bitter hostility toward the Jesuits — as documented by the [UN Truth Commission report](#) — the first reaction of United States officials on the day of the murders was the imprecise speculation that often served as a default US setting whenever political

violence struck in El Salvador: that “extremists on either the right or the left may be responsible,” as Ambassador William G. Walker wrote in his earliest cable to Washington about the crime.

The theory was expanded in a lengthy CIA memorandum the following day that dwelled on indications that the killers could have been from the guerrilla forces of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), citing such evidence as, “Civilians reported the presence of 100 insurgents eating and resting on the highway behind the Hoescht factory [near] Ciudad Merliot ... two kilometers southwest of the University of Central America ” On the other hand, wrote the Agency, the killers might have been “rightist extremists,” an encoded reference to polarizing rightwing politicians such as Roberto D’Aubuisson — a leading member of the ruling party ARENA — who reportedly made threatening comments about the priests in a talk given hours *after* they had already been killed. Nowhere in the CIA’s analysis was the military mentioned as a possible perpetrator.

In addition to ignoring signs that members of the armed forces had carried out the crime, US officials sought to bolster Salvadoran President Alfredo Cristiani as he prepared to face the possibility that his own party’s leadership was responsible for what Walker called “a barbarous and incredibly stupid action.” On November 19, Ambassador Walker sent an impassioned (and profoundly wrong) telegram to the State Department focusing on the alleged responsibility of ARENA extremists and proposing that he tell Cristiani that “with the USG [US Government], the leadership and majority of the armed forces officer corps, and the decent forces of Salvadoran society on his side, he can and must once and for all separate himself from those responsible for this barbarism.” Meanwhile, Secretary of State James Baker asked his ambassador in Madrid to urge Spain not to cut aid to El Salvador, which it had announced it would do in response to the murder of the Spanish-born priests.

As evidence began to emerge pointing to the Army’s role in the killings, the US documents reflected the alarm felt in Washington about its implications. Secretary Baker wrote directly to the Director of the CIA William Webster to request his agency’s assistance. “We would appreciate on an urgent basis information regarding the military units present in the area at the time of the killings, and the orders issued to such units.” US Assistant Secretary of State Bernard Aronson warned Ambassador Walker to hurry the investigations, arguing that allowing them to become drawn out would likely lead to stonewalling on the part of the Salvadoran government and impunity for the killers. Aronson evidently feared the consequences of publicly airing US suspicions about military responsibility for the killings, pressing Walker to keep his findings secret.

“I cannot stress enough the importance of building as solid a case as possible and then working closely with Cristiani on a strategy. We may be asking Cristiani to do what has never been done, actions which may involve moving against elements of his own party and perhaps even divide the Army. Please hold this information very closely.”

By the following year, in 1990, the US could no longer hide what its own investigation had uncovered: that [the Salvadoran armed forces “at the highest levels” made the decision to kill the Jesuits](#).

Now, 25 years later, the United States has a decision to make. Although the Salvadoran government has so far rejected Spain’s request for the extradition of suspects in the crime, one of the indicted officers — Col. (Ret.) Inocente Orlando Montano — pled guilty in 2012 to

charges of immigration fraud and perjury in a Boston courtroom and was sentenced in 2013 to 21 months in federal prison. [Spanish Judge Velásquez is seeking the extradition of Montano to Madrid following completion of his jail term](#). A US ruling in favor of extradition would permit the Spanish case to proceed to trial and offer families of the eight victims a chance at justice in what has been a long and painful odyssey.

Research Assistance by Alexandra Smith

THE DOCUMENTS

[Document 1](#): Jesuit Rector of UCA Shot Dead; Seven Others Killed

DNSA No. EL01044

U.S. Embassy in El Salvador

Confidential Cable

November 16, 1989

This confidential cable represents the U.S. Embassy's first reaction to the assassination of Father Ignacio Ellacuria and five other Jesuit priests, along with a housekeeper and her daughter, at the Central American University. The cable includes the names and positions of each of the victims, and summarily describes information collected by the Country Team regarding events at the University prior to the murders.

[Document 2](#): Situation Report As of 1430 Hours Local Time

DNSA No. EL00278

Central Intelligence Agency

Cable, Classification Excised

November 16, 1989

This cable from the Central Intelligence Agency illustrates the early understanding that the murders of Father Ignacio Ellacuria and his colleagues could have been perpetrated by the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). The news is buried in a general summary of FMLN activities, including the takeover of Police Detachment headquarters in Cuscatancingo, and discussion of the armed forces' "slow" progress in battling insurgents.

[Document 3](#): Movement of 1,000 Fresh FMLN Troops to San Salvador; Planned Role of Ellacuria in Effecting New Negotiations Between the FMLN and the Government

DNSA No. EL00279

Central Intelligence Agency

Cable, Classification Excised

November 17, 1989

This CIA cable summarizes talks between Father Ignacio Ellacuria and members of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front regarding negotiations with the government of El Salvador. The cable states that Ellacuria approved of the idea, and suggests that he was acting as a go-between for the two groups.

[Document 4](#): Killing of Dr. Ignacio Ellacuria

DNSA No. EL00281

Central Intelligence Agency

Intelligence Memorandum, Classification Excised
November 17, 1989

An intelligence summary suggesting possible perpetrators of the UCA murders, this CIA cable indicates: “deaths could have been perpetrated by extremists of left or right.” The military is not mentioned in this document, despite their prevalence in other sources.

[Document 5](#): Ellacuria Murder Et Al: Request for FBI Assistance
DNSA No. EL01046
U.S. Embassy in El Salvador
Limited Official Use Cable
November 18, 1989

In this official use cable reporting President Cristiani’s request for assistance from the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the investigation of the recent murders, Ambassador Walker insists that this crime should not go the way of all the other human rights crimes that had occurred in the 1980’s, and presses for a “credible investigation.”

[Document 6](#): Ellacuria Assassination
DNSA No. EL01047
U.S. Embassy in El Salvador
Secret Cable
November 19, 1989

Ambassador Walker reports finding the “first substantive evidence” that members of the Nationalist Republican Alliance “might have triggered events which led to [the] murder” of the Jesuit priests at UCA. The Ambassador calls on President Cristiani to recognize the truth about “the right” in his party, and stand up for democracy.

[Document 7](#): [Letter from Secretary of State to CIA Director Requesting Help with Investigation of Jesuit Murders]
DNSA No. EL01048
Department of State, Office of the Secretary
Secret Letter
November 20, 1989

Secretary of State Baker requests help from the Central Intelligence Agency in “developing information” about the perpetrators of the murder of Father Ellacuria and his colleagues. This request shows that the State Department was beginning to understand that the Army of El Salvador was involved in the crime.

[Document 8](#): Government Investigation of Killings in El Salvador
DNSA No. EL00282
Central Intelligence Agency
Intelligence Memorandum, Classification Excised
November 21, 1989

This CIA intelligence memorandum examines political constraints on President Cristiani as he decides how to move against the perpetrators of the Jesuit murders. The document focuses on the “circumstantial evidence” against Roberto D’Abuisson and the ARENA party. The memo states that Cristiani is “highly sensitive to international criticism of human rights

abuses in El Salvador.”

[Document 9](#): Demarche on Spanish Policy Toward El Salvador
DNSA No. 01049
Department of State
Confidential Cable
November 22, 1989

This State Department demarche requests that Ambassador Walker counsel Spain to take caution in steps against El Salvador, after reports of suspended aid and the potential for further “retaliatory actions” in response to the murder of the Spanish-born Jesuit priests. The cable includes talking points that emphasize the idea that “too much pressure at this delicate moment could play into the hands of the FMLN guerillas.”

[Document 10](#): Ellacuria Assassination
DNSA No. EL01050
Department of State
Secret Cable
November 22, 1989

Assistant Secretary of State Bernard Aronson urges Ambassador Walker to work with President Cristiani to move the case of the Jesuit murders hastily to its next stage. He states: “drawing it out will give those involved the chance to abort our efforts as they did in Romero assassination,” referring to the 1980 murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero by killers associated with ARENA leader Roberto D’Aubuisson. Aronson goes on to say that this may involve asking the president to “do what has never been done, actions which may involve moving against elements of his own party.” Aronson closes his note with the addendum: “Please hold this information very closely.”

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