

Written by CISPES

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Case comes as thousands protest the military school in Georgia where perpetrators of crime were trained by US officials

As people in the United States held a vigil on November 22-23 to mark the 19th anniversary of one of the most horrific massacres of the Salvadoran Civil War, two human rights organizations have filed a criminal complaint with the Spanish High Court against former president of El Salvador Alfredo Cristiani and 14 former members of El Salvador's armed forces for carrying out and covering up the atrocity.

The massacre took place on November 16 of 1989 when the US-trained and equipped Atlacatl Battalion murdered six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter. Members of the battalion were trained at the notorious "School of the Americas" (SOA/ WHINSEC) in Ft. Benning, Georgia, where an annual protest took place over weekend.

Rosa Lozano, a Salvadoran-American who attended the protest, said, "It's about time that Cristiani be singled out for his role in the massacre of the Jesuits. The impunity of government officials and military leaders who ordered the assassinations is one of the great injustices following our civil war." An Amnesty Law passed in 1993 has allowed for impunity in the case of the Jesuit massacre and countless other murders.

The complaint, filed by The Association for Human Rights in Spain (APDHE) with the support of the San Francisco-based organization Center for Justice and Accountability (CJA), will now go before the Spanish High Court who will decide whether to press charges against and seek the extradition of Cristiani and the 14 former military officials and soldiers for trial. The APDHE and CJA confirm that there is sufficient proof including eyewitness accounts and

government documents to prove the guilt of those charged.

Cristiani, who was president from 1989-1994 as part of the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) party is being charged with crimes against humanity and the cover-up of the massacre. The 14 military officials and soldiers are being charged with crimes against humanity, state-sponsored terrorism, and murder.

Regarding the charges against Cristiani, current president of El Salvador Tony Saca of the ARENA party said, "Definitively, president Cristiani had absolutely nothing to do with this," and added, "we are with him and support him, and we will support him until the last moment because he is an historic man for our country."

According to Burke Stansbury, Executive Director of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, "The reaction of Saca and the ARENA party is part of a long, sordid history of attempting to cover up the atrocities committed during the war. The brutal history of the ARENA party—which was founded by Roberto D'Aubuisson, the leader of the death squads during the war—has continued through its repressive tactics today. That history must be exposed."

The charges come just as campaigning begins for El Salvador's 2009 municipal, legislative, and presidential elections. The Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), a former guerrilla force turned political party, is currently ahead of ARENA by over 10 points in the latest presidential polls. FMLN victories in the legislative elections would give the party a greater presence in the Legislative Assembly and could potentially lead to an end to the current Amnesty Law, allowing the case to be tried in El Salvador.

The connection with the U.S. is also significant because the Bush Administration remains a close ally of the ARENA government in El Salvador. In 2004, US officials intervened in El Salvador's presidential elections on behalf of ARENA; four months before the 2009 presidential elections, a new dirty campaign has emerged with the aim of preventing an FMLN victory.

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"In protesting the SOA in Georgia we are also protesting against other forms of U.S.-sponsored violence and intervention in Central America. In addition to meddling in El Salvador's elections, the U.S. continues to train repressive Salvadoran police at the Congress-funded International Law Enforcement Academy," said Lozano.

The Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) will be sending two delegations of election observers to El Salvador—for the municipal and legislative elections in January and for the presidential elections in March. For more information on the Spanish case for crimes against humanity and its electoral implications, or to learn about how to participate as an international observer in the March delegation, contact CISPES at 202-521-2510 or on the web at www.cispes.org.