

3 June 1981

### Salvadorans Held In Murder of Two Americans

Ricardo Sol Meza was arraigned at the Fifth Penal Court in San Salvador on 24 May in connection with the 3 January deaths of American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD) officials Michael P. Hammer and Mark D. Pearlman and the former president of the Salvadoran Agrarian Transformation Institute (ISTA), Jose Rodolfo Viera. (See the issue of 7 January 1981.) Also implicated in the murders is Hans Christ (Krist), a Salvadoran with dual West German citizenship who was arrested on 15 April by FBI agents in Miami. It appeared that Christ was planning to leave for West Germany or Chile. He is still being held in a Miami jail pending the outcome of extradition proceedings.

Both Sol Meza and Christ, who is Sol Meza's brother-in-law, are suspected of having ties to rightwing groups opposed to the Salvadoran land reform program. Christ's father, who reportedly owned a large cotton plantation that was expropriated by the Government, now lives in self-exile in Guatemala. Sol Meza is one of the wealthiest men in El Salvador and has an interest in the San Salvador Sheraton where the three men were slain.

It is still unclear whether Pearlman and Hammer were targeted by the assassins or they just unfortunately happened to be in the company of Viera, the real target. There are indications that the killings may not have been a careful plot, but rather a spur-of-the-moment decision due to the lateness of the hour and the empty dining room. Viera, because of his position with ISTA, had incurred the enmity of the large landowners. The land reform program originally included the expropriation of estates of more than 1200 acres but had been expanded to include those of more than 500 acres. Hammer, who had just returned to El Salvador, was well known as one of the architects of the land reform policy. Sol Meza in sworn testimony stated that neither he nor his party was in the dining area where the trio was seated, but rather at a table adjacent to the roller skating rink located at the Sheraton. Included in Sol Meza's party was National Guard Major Denis Moran. Teresa de Jesus Torres, a waitress at the hotel, testified that she had seen Sol Meza and Christ in the corridor leading to the dining room before the murders and they were making hand signals to someone outside. At least one other man is being sought for involvement in the killings and three others may be involved as conspirators. Torres was brought to the U.S. for protection but returned to El Salvador for the deposition. She is still in protective custody.

Sol Meza and Christ maintain their innocence, and a conviction will be difficult because of the politics of the case. Another witness is considered essential to corroborate Torres' testimony in order to win conviction in a Salvador court; prosecutors are hoping to produce one soon. The entire judicial process could take a year or more. Meanwhile, Sol Meza remains incarcerated in Mariona Penitentiary and enjoys benefits and accommodations not usually accorded other prisoners.

Approved for Release

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