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PANAMA: Church leaders are cautiously turning up the heat on the government over the case of a missing priest.

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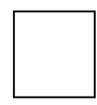
The strong agitation over the case has surprised the government, which has further damaged its own position by proposing incredible theses to explain the priest's fate. Although the church leaders want to defend the church against the threat implicit in Father Gallegos' death, they seem fearful of what an open confrontation with the regime will bring. They have let go by several opportunities for a successful attack on the government, while keeping alive public interest by having something to release to the press and television each day.

The church's hiring of a professional investigator has been funded mainly by leading families, suggesting that other natural opponents of the regime may be encouraging the church to meet the government head-on. The response from Torrijos to church charges of a whitewash or some dramatic breakthrough in the case, such as the discovery of the body, might force the church into an open challenge to the government.



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29 Jun 71

Central Intelligence Bulletin

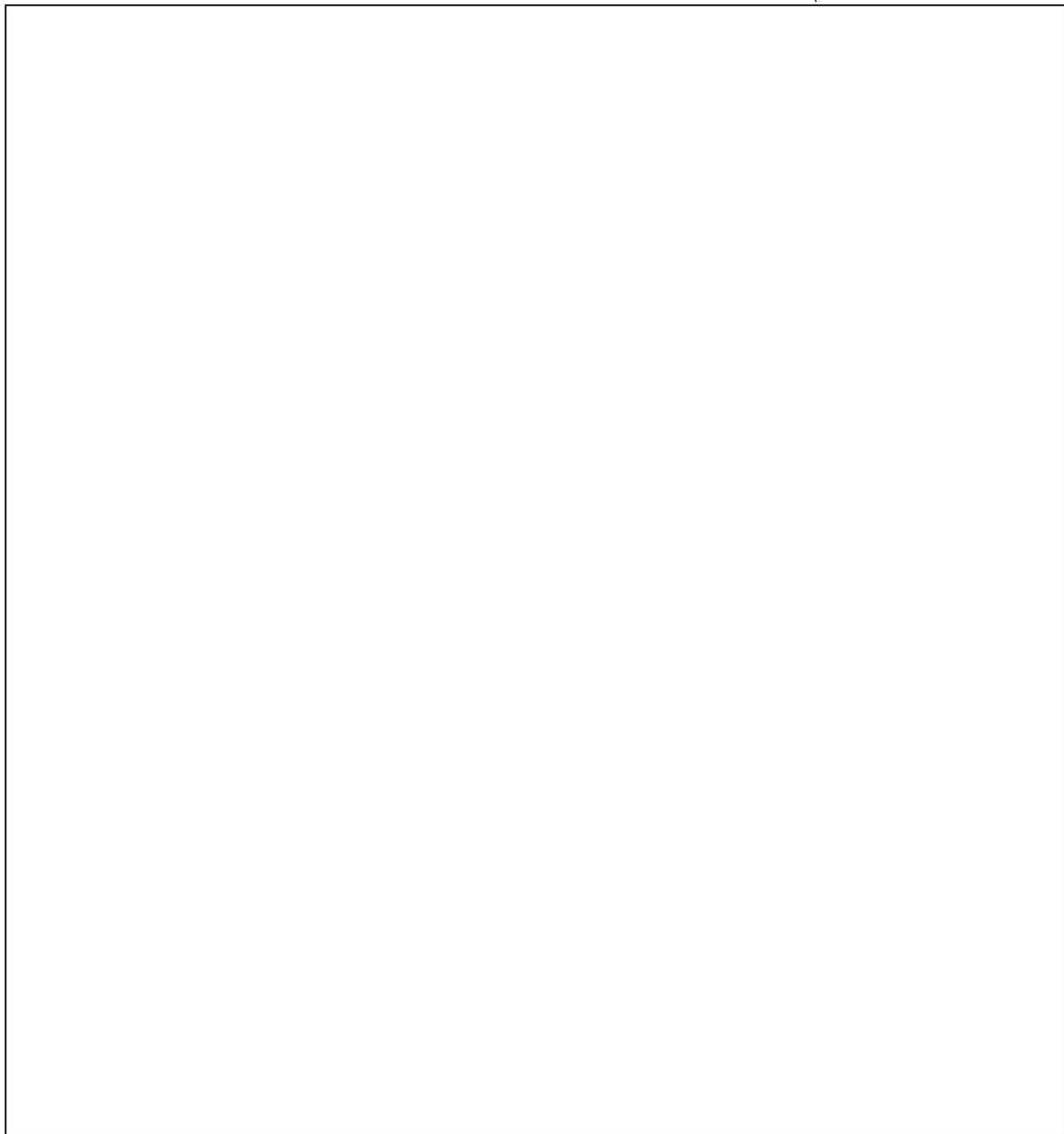
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