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El Salvador

Move on ultraright?

Fighting in El Salvador ground to a temporary halt as the revolutionary forces called a truce to allow the traditional celebration of Holy Week. International attention focused meanwhile on Miami, Fla., where there was a break in the case of two U.S. land reform officials murdered in El Salvador at the beginning of this year.

Federal officials announced April 15 the arrest of Hans Christ, 30, son of a wealthy Salvadoran landowner, in the killing. A short time later, Salvadoran authorities said they had already arrested Ricardo Sol Meza, one of the country's wealthiest men, also in connection with the murders of the two Americans; Michael Hammer and Mark Pearlman.

The victims were officials of the AFL-CIO-sponsored American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD). They were assassinated along with Jose Rodolfo Viera, head of the Salvadoran Communal Union (UCS), an AIFLD-created peasant organization, while meeting over late-night coffee at the San Salvador Hotel Sheraton in early January.

Many observers believe the arrests may suggest some movement by the Reagan administration to crack down on the most fascist elements within the Salvadoran government and among the country's oligarchy. Such steps would mitigate some of the popular domestic and international rejection of U.S. policy by bolstering the myth that the rightist Salvadoran government is "moderate."

But, although this may be a "smarter" U.S. policy, links between the ultrarightists in El Salvador and the U.S. "new right," which is firmly based in the administration, are believed to be strong. Thus it is unclear how far the White House will go in an effort to stem the most horrific acts on the part of these former elements. A more significant test will come regarding the still-unsolved murders of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero and of four U.S. religious workers.

OLIGARCHY V. CIA?

The case against the just-arrested members of El Salvador's oligarchy meanwhile reflects the struggle within the rightist Salvadoran regime. According to eyewitnesses to the murders, two assassins entered the heavily guarded hotel, a center for both the oligarchy and U.S. officials working in El Salvador. One waited at the door of the coffee shop while the other walked to the table and shot the three men with a pistol.

After Christ's arrest last week, additional facts were revealed which indicate that both Christ and the other suspect, Sol Meza, were in the hotel coffee shop when the three labor officials entered. The three men initially seated themselves at a table near the two suspects and then moved to another table out of ear-shot when they recognized Christ, Sol Meza and their other companions as major right-wing opponents of the agrarian reform.

Reportedly, Christ and Sol Meza then left the hotel as the AIFLD officials continued their conversation. Shortly following their departure, the assassins entered the hotel and shot the men.

The AFL-CIO and its subsidiary AIFLD had been pressuring both the Salvadoran and U.S. governments to solve the murders. AIFLD, an educational institute set up in the 1960s by U.S. business and labor to influence the Latin American trade union movement, has been deeply involved in the planning and operation of the junta's land program.

SPOTLIGHT ON 'MIAMI CONNECTION'

In 1968, AIFLD established the peasant organization UCS in an attempt to channel rural discontent away from the influence of progressive forces. The U.S. body reportedly is one of the organizations paying the salary of Dr. Roy Prosterman, principal advisor to and author of part of the land project.

Former CIA agent Philip Agee has identified AIFLD as a CIA-front organization, while Victor Reuther, brother of the late labor leader Walter Reuther, indicated that AIFLD had been the recipient of CIA funds during the 1960s.

After the January deaths of Hammer and Pearlman, the U.S. Justice Department attorney, in oral argument before the Supreme Court, intimated that the two men were operating as CIA agents in El Salvador. AIFLD's director, William Doherty, denies CIA links as well as all such charges about Hammer and Pearlman.

The arrest of Hans Christ again focuses the spotlight on the "Miami Connection," the Salvadoran exile community the U.S. believed to be responsible for arming both the security forces and the death squads. Former U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador Robert White, among others, has declared that exiles in that city are aiding rightist forces both within the Duarte government and outside of it. In April 9 Congressional testimony, White identified Miami resident Alberto Lagos Mena, reportedly second in command of the death squads under ex-Maj. Robert D'abuisson, as an important conduit of ultra-rightist support to El Salvador.

White also spoke of a document given to him by former junta member Col. Adolfo Majano listing the names of 100 people both in and around the government on the payroll of the Miami oligarchy. White reportedly forwarded that material to U.S. State Department officials along with other documents used by the Reagan administration for its controversial White Paper.

In his testimony, White did not mention the El Salvador Freedom Foundation, an organization of Salvadoran oligarchs also based in Miami who have lobbied against both Reagan and Carter policy toward El Salvador. Key leaders of the foundation are Orlando De Sola, a member of one of the country's wealthiest families, and Luis Salaverria, a wealthy landowner from Ahuachapan, a western province. The foundation is represented in the U.S. by the public relations firm of McKenzie-McCheyne, the same company that represented the late Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza. The former ambassador also indicated that he had seen evidence implicating reputed death squad head Maj. Roberto D'abuisson, in last year's murder of Archbishop Romero. White spoke of documents taken from D'abuisson at the time of his arrest last year when he and others attempted a coup d'etat. In those documents, D'abuisson is revealed to have been planning a major action on the same night when the archbishop was shot.

D'abuisson was head of intelligence in the National Guard during the regime of Gen. Carlos Humberto Romero, overthrown in October 1979. He reportedly has close links with the U.S. right through the American Security Council, which sponsored his 1980 trip to Washington where he met with right-wing Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.).

CHALLENGE TO REAGAN

Observers note that White's testimony is a direct challenge to the Reagan administration to move against the Salvadoran fascist sectors.

The investigation of the murders of the four women meanwhile appears to be stymied. There are reports that the murderers are among the Treasury Police, one of the junta's security forces, which Defense Minister Jose Guillermo Garcia recently claimed was "out of control."

If the Reagan administration does to some degree stem the ultrarightist forces, many observers believe that it may be able to at least partially disarm many of its liberal critics, particularly in the Congress. The aim is to win support for the war of extermination which the junta and the U.S. government have been waging in El Salvador since early 1980.

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