

Page Denied

Next 9 Page(s) In Document Denied

In Human Rights Court, Honduras Is First to Face Death Squad Trial

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Special to The New York Times

SAN JOSE, Costa Rica, Jan. 18 — In the first case ever tried by the Inter-American Court on Human Rights in which a Government has been put on trial, Honduras is being accused here of maintaining army death squads that caused the "disappearance" of civilians suspected of being leftists.

Honduras denies the charge, but two key witnesses involved in the case have been shot to death in Honduras in the last two weeks in what human rights advocates assert is an effort by members of the Honduran Army death squads to silence their critics.

Killings by Government death squads in Honduras since 1980 are well known to the Reagan Administration and to the Central Intelligence Agency, which trained Honduran soldiers who then worked in the death squads, according to several American officials and a former member of a Honduran death squad who said he was trained by the C.I.A.

Despite that knowledge, the Reagan Administration continues to contend that Honduras has an acceptable human rights record, continues to aid the Honduran police and army and appears to have done nothing to assist the trial under way here nor denounce the killings of witnesses in Honduras.

"I have never seen a case in which the United States Government is so deeply linked to the human rights abuses of a Government as in Honduras," Aryeh Neier, vice chairman of the New York-based human rights group, Americas Watch, said in an interview.

"The killings of witnesses in this trial is a direct threat to the integrity of the Inter-American system, which the United States has not in any way defended."

The Inter-American Court on Human Rights, which is hearing the case here and is expected to reach a verdict within the next two months, is a judicial arm of the Organization of American States, which is the leading inter-American political organization of which both the United States and Honduras are members.

Honduras has promised to fully and

Continued on Page A6, Column 1

Honduras Is First Country Tried for Death Squads

Continued From Page A1

immediately comply with a new Central American peace treaty that demands that Governments in the region respect and defend human rights.

The lead witness in the trial here, Miguel Angel Pavón, was shot to death with a friend four days ago in the town San Pedro Sula, a center of recent death squad killings in Honduras.

Mr. Pavón was a prominent figure in Honduras who headed the regional office of the Honduran Human Rights Commission, the most outspoken human rights group in the country and the target of regular criticisms by American and Honduran officials.

Two weeks ago, unknown assailants also fatally shot José Isaias Vilorio, a former Honduran Army sergeant who is believed to have been a death squad member and who was to have testified here today. The gunmen covered Mr. Vilorio with a rebel banner after killing him, a fact that Honduran officials say indicates leftist rebels carried out the murder.

Critics of the Government say, however, that the rebel banner was a crude attempt by an army death squad to shift the blame for the killing. The Honduran guerrillas have not carried out such a killing before and it seems unlikely they would shoot a witness in a trial that is so damaging to the Government and, indirectly, politically beneficial to them.

The court case here focuses on the disappearances in Honduras from 1981 to 1982 of two Honduran civilians, Saúl Godínez and Manfredo Velásquez, as well as two Costa Ricans, Yolanda Solís and Francisco Fairen Garbí. The families of the four disappeared civilians contend that army death squads captured and killed them, a charge the Honduran Government denies.

But there appears to be considerable circumstantial evidence that the four were captured and killed by the Honduran military and the weight of evidence in the trial here so far appears to be strongly against the Government.

Solled by Terrorism

While the case formally deals only with the four missing persons named in the trial, it is being treated by diplomats and judges as of far greater symbolic significance. In effect, the trial is the first public effort by the Organization of American States to condemn the activities of Government death squads throughout Latin America.

The four people in the case here appear to be among an estimated 140

The case is a way to condemn the disappearance of civilians.

civilians killed by army death squads in Honduras from 1980 to the present. Those 140 civilians are a small fraction of the tens of thousands who have been captured, tortured and killed without trial by the armies of Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile, Bolivia, Peru, Colombia, El Salvador and Guatemala, among other offenders, in the wave of terrorism that has soiled Latin America in the last two decades.

A former Honduran Army sergeant, Florencio Caballero, testified in earlier proceedings in the trial here that he was a member of an army death squad. He then detailed his involvement in interrogating civilians captured by army death squads. He said the prisoners were all killed.

Mr. Caballero said he was trained by the C.I.A. to be an interrogator and he has given convincing details to back that assertion, which American officials concede is true. Mr. Caballero said in an interview last year that he tried to hide his death squad activities from his C.I.A. advisers in Honduras, but American officials say the C.I.A.

and the American Embassy in Honduras were well aware of the slayings.

Despite that fact, the Reagan Administration has annually asserted that the Honduran Government is improving its human rights performance. Despite recent killings in the last year, Secretary of State George P. Shultz told Congress that Honduras has an acceptable human rights record once again — thereby approving new police assistance for Honduras.

That approval comes despite the fact that until recently a leading official in the Honduran police was an army officer well known to the American Embassy as the former commander of army death squads, according to three American officials and two Honduran soldiers.

The army officer in question is Lieut. Col. Alexander Hernández, who has denied the charges against him. But American officials and Honduran military sources said Mr. Hernández formerly commanded the 316th Battalion, an intelligence unit established by the C.I.A. that ran several death squads.

Despite such accusations Mr. Hernández has regularly been given top jobs in the army and was recently promoted to lieutenant colonel by President José Azcona Hoyo of Honduras, who two days ago in Costa Rica promised to uphold the new regional peace treaty calling for full respect of human rights.

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