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20 November 1991

SUBJECT: The Jesuit Case

- On 15 November 1989 members of the Salvadoran Armed Forces High command met at the Armed Forces Headquarters to discuss strategy during the ongoing FMLN offensive; some evidence suggests they may have held two meetings.
- On the early morning of 16 November 1989 members of the Atlacatl Battalion, under the operational control of Colonel Guillermo Benavides, entered the campus of the University of Central America in San Salvador and allegedly killed six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and the housekeeper's daughter.
- In mid-December 1989, prosecutors in the Attorney General's office began questioning soldiers.
- In January 1990 President Cristiani announced the Special Investigative Unit (SIU) had developed evidence implicating men in the Atlacatl Battalion in the murders. Evidence included ballistics data and testimonies from at least three soldiers who said Benavides ordered them to kill the Jesuits. On 12 January the government arrested eight suspects; an additional suspect had deserted in December and remains at large. Judge Zamora, assigned soon after the murders to oversee the investigation, ruled that enough evidence existed to hold the suspects, who were ruled ineligible for bail.
- In June 1990 Judge Zamora ordered the arrest of Lt. Col. Camilo Hernandez for burning log books wanted as evidence. (Some 70 military logbooks were destroyed weeks after the killings, an estimated 20 of which reportedly may have given evidence relevant to the case.)

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- On 2 September 1990 President Cristiani testified in court that no mention was made of the Jesuits at the High Command meeting on the night before the murders.

- On 10 December 1990 Judge Zamora raised the case to plenary, ending the investigation.

- On September 28, 1991 a San Salvador jury convicted Colonel Benavides for the murder of the priests and the housekeeper and her daughter. Lieutenant Yussi Mendoza, assigned to the military academy under Benavides' command, was convicted on a single count of murder for the death of the housekeeper's daughter. An additional two officers and the enlisted men were found not guilty. Charges of conspiracy are still pending against the officers.

- The conviction of Benavides was the first time a senior Salvadoran officer has been convicted of a human rights violation.

- Military testimony has never established the precise chain of command between Minister of Defense Ponce and Colonel Benavides on the night of the murders and has failed to clarify doubts about a possible coverup.

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- The "intellectual authorship" of the murders has not been established and reporting is conflicting on the chronology of events surrounding the murders. Some reporting suggests that Ponce may have been part of a coverup and may have defied Cristiani's orders to turn all evidence over to the courts. One version of the complicated sequence of events prior to the murders and implication that Ponce was somehow involved in the events was the subject of a memorandum dissemination of June 1990.

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