

Truth Commissions: Reports: El Salvador

From Madness to Hope: The 12-Year War in El Salvador

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1. ILLUSTRATIVE CASE: THE MURDERS OF THE JESUIT PRIESTS

SUMMARY OF THE CASE

In the early hours on 16 November 1989, six Jesuit priests, a cook and her 16-year-old daughter were shot and killed at the Pastoral Centre of José Simeón Cañas Central American University (UCA) in San Salvador. The victims were Fathers Ignacio Ellacuría, Rector of the University; Ignacio Martín-Baró, Vice-Rector; Segundo Montes, Director of the Human Rights Institute; Amando López, Joaquín López y López and Juan Ramón Moreno, all teachers at UCA; and Julia Elba Ramos and her daughter, Celina Mariceth Ramos.

Criminal proceedings were subsequently brought against members of the armed forces for the murders; they included Colonel Guillermo Alfredo Benavides Moreno, Director of the Military College, accused of having given the order to murder the priests; Lieutenant Yushy René Mendoza Vallecillos, an officer of the Military College, and Lieutenants José Ricardo Espinoza Guerra and Gonzalo Guevara Cerritos, officers of the Atlacatl Battalion, all of them accused of commanding the operation; and five soldiers of the Atlacatl Battalion, accused of committing the murders.

In 1991, a jury found Colonel Benavides guilty of all the murders and Lieutenant Mendoza Vallecillos guilty of the murder of the young girl, Celina Mariceth Ramos. The judge imposed the maximum sentence, 30 years in prison, which they are currently serving. The judge also found Colonel Benavides and Lieutenant Mendoza guilty of instigation and conspiracy to commit acts of terrorism. Lieutenants Espinoza and Guevara Cerritos were sentenced to three years for instigation and conspiracy to commit acts of terrorism. Lieutenant Colonel Hernández was convicted by the judge of being an accessory, as was Mendoza Vallecillos. All, except for Colonel Benavides and Lieutenant Mendoza, were released on bail and remained in the armed forces.

The Commission on the Truth makes the following findings and recommendations:

1. On the night of 15 November 1989, then Colonel René Emilio Ponce, in the presence of an in collusion with General Juan Rafael Bustillo, then Colonel Juan Orlando Zepeda, Colonel Inocente Orlando Montano and Colonel Francisco Elena Fuentes, gave Colonel Guillermo Alfredo Benavides the order to kill Father Ignacio Ellacuría and to leave no witnesses. For that purpose, Colonel Benavides was given the use of a unit from the Atlacatl Battalion, which had been sent to search the priests' residence two days previously.

2. Subsequently, all these officers and others, including General Gilberto Rubio Rubio, knowing what had happened, took steps to conceal the truth.

3. That same night, Colonel Guillermo Alfredo Benavides informed the officers at

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the Military College of the order for the murder. When he asked whether anyone had any objection, they all remained silent.

4. The operation was organized by then Major Carlos Camilo Hernández Barahona and carried out by a group of soldiers from the Atlacatl Battalion under the command of Lieutenant José Ricardo Espinoza Guerra and Second Lieutenant Gonzalo Guevara Cerritos, accompanied by Lieutenant Yushy René Mendoza Vallecillos.

5. Colonel Oscar Alberto León Linares, Commander of the Atlacatl Battalion, knew of the murder and concealed incriminating evidence.

6. Colonel Manuel Antonio Rivas Mejía, Head of the Commission for the Investigation of Criminal Acts (CIHD), learnt the facts and concealed the truth; he also recommended to Colonel Benavides measures for the destruction of incriminating evidence.

7. Colonel Nelson Iván López y López, who was assigned to assist in the CIHD investigation, learnt what had happened and concealed the truth.

8. Rodolfo Antonio Parker Soto, a lawyer and member of the Special Honour Commission, altered statements in order to conceal the responsibility of senior officers for the murder.

9. The Commission believes that it is unfair that Colonel Guillermo Alfredo Benavides Moreno and Lieutenant Yushy René Mendoza Vallecillos should still be in prison when the people responsible for planning the murders and the person who gave the order remain at liberty. In the Commission's view, the request by the Society of Jesus that Colonel Guillermo Alfredo Benavides Moreno and Lieutenant Yushy René Mendoza Vallecillos be pardoned should be granted by the relevant authorities.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FACTS ¹²⁸

In the early hours of 16 November 1989, a group of soldiers from the Atlacatl Battalion entered the campus of José Simeón Cañas Central American University (UCA) in San Salvador. They made their way to the Pastoral Centre, which was the residence of Jesuit priests Ignacio Ellacuría, Rector of the University; Ignacio Martín-Baró, Vice-Rector; Segundo Montes, Director of the Human Rights Institute; and Amando López, Joaquín López y López and Juan Ramón Moreno, all teachers at UCA.

The soldiers tried to force their way into the Pastoral Centre. When the priests realized what was happening, they let the soldiers in voluntarily. The soldiers searched the building and ordered the priests to go out into the back garden and lie face down on the ground.

The lieutenant in command, José Ricardo Espinoza Guerra, gave the order to kill the priests. Fathers Ellacuría, Martín-Baró and Montes were shot and killed by Private Oscar Mariano Amaya Grimaldi, Fathers López and Moreno by Deputy Sergeant Antonio Ramiro Avalos Vargas. Shortly afterwards, the soldiers, including Corporal Angel Pérez Vásquez, found Father Joaquín López y López inside the residence and killed him. Deputy Sergeant Tomás Zarpate Castillo shot Julia Elva Ramos, who was working in the residence, and her 16-year-old daughter, Celina Mariceth Ramos. Private José Alberto Sierra Ascencio shot

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them again, finishing them off.

The soldiers took a small suitcase belonging to the priests, with photographs, documents and \$5,000.

They fired a machine gun at the façade of the residence and launched rockets and grenades. Before leaving, they wrote on a piece of cardboard: "FMLN executed those who informed on it. Victory or death, FMLN."

Preceding events

A few hours earlier, on 15 November between 10 p.m. and 11 p.m., Colonel Guillermo Alfredo Benavides Moreno, Director of the Military College, met with the officers under his command. The officers present included Major Carlos Camilo Hernández Barahona, Captain José Fuentes Rodas, Lieutenants Mario Arévalo Meléndez, Nelson Alberto Barra Zamora, Francisco Mónico Gallardo Mata, José Vicente Hernández Ayala, Ramón Eduardo López Larios, René Roberto López Morales, Yusshy René Mendoza Vallecillos, Edgar Santiago Martínez Marroquín and Second Lieutenant Juan de Jesús Guzmán Morales.

Colonel Benavides told them that he had just come from a meeting at the General Staff at which special measures had been adopted to combat FMLN offensive, which had begun on 11 November. Those present at the meeting had been informed that the situation was critical and it had been decided that artillery and armoured vehicles should be used.

Those present at the meeting had also been informed that all known subversive elements must be eliminated. Colonel Benavides said that he had received orders to eliminate Father Ignacio Ellacuría and to leave no witnesses.

Colonel Benavides asked any officers who objected to the order to raise their hands. No one did.

Major Hernández Barahona organized the operation. Troops from the Atlacatl Battalion were used, under the command of Lieutenant José Ricardo Espinoza Guerra. In order to overcome any reluctance on his part, it was arranged that Lieutenant Yusshy René Mendoza Vallecillos, who had graduated from officer training school in the same class ("tanda") as him, would also participate.

After the meeting, Major Hernández Barahona met with Lieutenant Mendoza Vallecillos, Lieutenant Espinoza Guerra and Second Lieutenant Gonzalo Guevara Cerritos of the Atlacatl Battalion. In order to pin responsibility for the deaths on FMLN, they decided not to use regulation firearms and to leave no witnesses. After the murders, they would simulate an attack and leave a sign mentioning FMLN.

It was decided to use an AK-47 rifle belonging to Major Hernández Barahona, because the weapon had been captured from FMLN and was identifiable. The rifle was entrusted to Private Mariano Amaya Grimaldi, who knew how to use it.

In order to reach UCA, it was necessary to pass through the defence cordons of the military complex. Lieutenant Martínez Marroquín arranged for the Atlacatl soldiers to pass.

Lieutenants Espinoza Guerra and Mendoza Vallecillos and Second Lieutenant Guevara Cerritos left the Military College in two pick-up trucks with the soldiers from the Atlacatl Battalion. They went to some empty buildings which are close to the UCA campus, where other soldiers of the Atlacatl Battalion were waiting. There, Lieutenant Espinoza indicated who would keep watch and who would enter the Jesuits' residence.

Background

Members of the armed forces used to call UCA a "refuge of subversives". Colonel Juan Orlando Zepeda, Vice-Minister for Defence, publicly accused UCA of being the centre of operations where FMLN terrorist strategy was planned. Colonel Inocente Montano, Vice-Minister for Public Security, stated publicly that the Jesuits were fully identified with subversive movements.

Father Ellacuría had played an important role in the search for a negotiated, peaceful solution to the armed conflict. Sectors of the armed forces identified the Jesuit priests with FMLN because of the priests' special concern for those sectors of Salvadorian society who were poorest and most affected by the war.

On two earlier occasions that same year, 1989, bombs had gone off at the University printing house.

The offensive

The offensive launched by FMLN on 11 November reached proportions that the armed forces had not expected and which alarmed them. The guerrillas gained control of various areas in and around San Salvador. They attacked the official and private residences of the President of the Republic and the residence of the President of the Legislative Assembly. They also attacked the barracks of the First, Third and Sixth Infantry Brigades and those of the National Police. On 12 November, the Government declared a state of emergency and imposed a 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew.

At a meeting of the General Staff on 13 November, security commands were created to deal with the offensive. Each command was headed by an officer under the operational control of Colonel René Emilio Ponce, Chief of the Armed Forces Joint Staff. Colonel Benavides Moreno was designated to head the military complex security command, a zone which included the Military College, the Ministry of Defence, the Joint Staff, the National Intelligence Department (DNI), the Arce and Palermo districts (most of whose residents were members of the armed forces), the residence of the United States Ambassador and the UCA campus.

A national radio channel was also established, the pilot station being Radio Cuscatlán of the armed forces. Telephone calls to the station were broadcast in a "phone-in" in which callers levelled accusations at Father Ellacuría and went so far as to call for his death.

On 11 November, guerrillas blew up one of the main gates of the University and crossed the University campus. The next day, a military detachment was stationed to watch who went in and out of the University. From 13 November onwards no one was permitted onto the campus.

On 13 November, Colonel Ponce ordered Colonel Joaquín Arnoldo Cerna Flores,

head of unit III of the General Staff, to arrange for a search of UCA premises. According to Colonel Ponce, he ordered the search because he had been informed that there were over 200 guerrillas inside the University.

Colonel Cerna Flores entrusted the search to Lieutenant José Ricardo Espinoza Guerra, who took some 100 men from the Atlacatl Battalion. Lieutenant Héctor Ulises Cuenca Ocampo of the National Intelligence Department (DNI) joined the troops at the entrance to UCA to assist with the search. Lieutenant Espinoza Guerra personally directed the search of the Jesuits' residence. They found no signs of any guerrilla presence, war matériel or propaganda.

On completing the search, Lieutenant Espinoza Guerra reported to Major Hernández Barahona. He then went to the General Staff where he reported to Colonel Cerna Flores.

At 6.30 p.m. on 15 November there was a meeting of the General Staff with military heads and commanders to adopt new measures to deal with the offensive. Colonel Ponce authorized the elimination of ringleaders, trade unionists and known leaders of FMLN and a decision was taken to step up bombing by the Air Force and to use artillery and armoured vehicles to dislodge FMLN from the areas it controlled.

The Minister of Defence, General Rafael Humberto Larios López, asked whether anyone objected. No hand was raised. It was agreed that President Cristiani would be consulted about the measures.

After the meeting, the officers stayed in the room talking in groups. One of these groups consisted of Colonel René Emilio Ponce, General Juan Rafael Bustillo, Colonel Francisco Elena Fuentes, Colonel Juan Orlando Zepeda and Colonel Inocente Orlando Montano. Colonel Ponce called over Colonel Guillermo Alfredo Benavides and, in front of the four other officers, ordered him to eliminate Father Ellacuría and to leave no witnesses. He also ordered him to use the unit from the Atlacatl Battalion which had carried out the search two days earlier.

From 12 to 1.30 a.m. the next day, 16 November, President Cristiani met with the High Command. According to his statement, the President approved a new arrangement for using armoured units of the cavalry regiment and artillery pieces; at no time during this meeting was anything said about UCA.

The cover-up

During the early hours of the morning of 16 November, Major Carlos Camilo Hernández Barahona and Lieutenant José Vicente Hernández Ayala went in person to Colonel Ponce's office to report on everything that had happened at UCA. They reported that they had a small suitcase with photographs, documents and money which the soldiers had stolen from the Jesuits a few hours earlier. Colonel Ponce ordered it destroyed because it was evidence of the armed forces' responsibility. They destroyed the suitcase at the Military College.

On returning to his unit, Lieutenant Espinoza Guerra informed the Commander of the Atlacatl Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Oscar Alberto León Linares, of what had happened.

President Cristiani entrusted the investigation of the crime to the Commission for the Investigation of Criminal Acts (CIHD).

Colonel Benavides told Lieutenant Colonel Manuel Antonio Rivas Mejía, Head of CIHD, what had happened and asked him for help. Mejía recommended that the barrels of the weapons which had been used be destroyed and replaced with others in order to prevent them from being identified during ballistic tests. This was later done with the assistance of Lieutenant Colonel Oscar Alberto León Linares.

Lieutenant Colonel Rivas Mejía also advised Colonel Benavides to make sure that no record remained of those entering and leaving the Military College that would make it possible to identify the culprits. Subsequently, Colonel Benavides and Major Hernández Barahona ordered that all Military College arrival and departure logs for that year and the previous year be burned.

Shortly after the investigation began, Colonel René Emilio Ponce arranged for Colonel Nelson Iván López y López, head of unit I of the General Staff, who had also been in charge of the General Staff Tactical Operations Centre during the entire night of 15 to 16 November, to join CIHD in order to assist in the investigation of the case.

In November, CIHD heard two witnesses, Deputy Sergeant Germán Orellana Vázquez and police officer Victor Manuel Orellana Hernández, who testified that they had seen soldiers of the Atlacatl Battalion near UCA that night; they later changed their statements.

Another witness also retracted her initial statement. Lucía Barrera de Cerna, an employee at the University, said that she had seen, from a building adjacent to the Jesuits' residence, soldiers in camouflage and berets. In the United States, where she went for protection, she was questioned by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and retracted her earlier statement. Lieutenant Colonel Rivas Mejía, Head of CIHD, was present when she was questioned. Subsequently, she confirmed her original statement.

CIHD did not take a statement from Colonel Benavides, even though the incident had occurred within his command zone. According to the court dossier, the first statement Benavides made was on 11 January 1990 to the Special Honour Commission.

On 2 January 1990, a month and a half after the murders, Major Eric Warren Buckland, an officer of the United States Army and an adviser to the armed forces of El Salvador, reported to his superior, Lieutenant Colonel William Hunter, a conversation he had some days previously with Colonel Carlos Armando Avilés Buitrago. During that conversation, Avilés Buitrago had told him that he had learnt, through Colonel López y López, that Benavides had arranged the murders and that a unit from the Atlacatl Battalion had carried them out. He also said that Benavides had asked Lieutenant Colonel Rivas Mejía for help.

Lieutenant Colonel William Hunter informed the Chief of the United States Military Mission, Colonel Milton Menjívar, who arranged a meeting in Colonel Ponce's office where Buckland and Avilés were brought face to face. Avilés denied having given Buckland such information.

A few days after Buckland's statements were reported, the Minister of Defence established a Special Honour Commission, consisting of five officers and two civilians, to investigate the murders.

On learning what CIHD had found out, the Honour Commission questioned some

30 members of the Atlacatl Battalion, including Lieutenant Espinoza Guerra and Second Lieutenant Guevara Cerritos, and a number of officers of the Military College, including Colonel Benavides and Lieutenant Mendoza Vallecillos.

Lieutenants Espinoza and Mendoza and Second Lieutenant Guevara, as well as the soldiers who had participated in the murders, confessed their crime in extrajudicial statements to the Honour Commission.

A civilian member of the Commission, Rodolfo Antonio Parker Soto, legal adviser to the General Staff, altered their statements in order to delete any reference to the existence of orders from above. He also deleted the references to some officers, including the one to Major Carlos Camilo Hernández Barahona.

On 12 January, the Commission submitted its report to President Cristiani. The report identified nine people as being responsible for the murders, four officers and five soldiers; they were arrested and later brought to trial. Subsequently, newly promoted Lieutenant Colonel Carlos Camilo Hernández Barahona was included in the trial.

The pre-trial proceedings took nearly two years. During this time, Colonel (now General) René Emilio Ponce, Colonel (now General) Juan Orlando Zepeda, Colonel Inocente Orlando Montano and Colonel (now General) Gilberto Rubio Rubio pressured lower-ranking officers not to mention orders from above in their testimony to the court.

Finally, the trial by jury took place on 26, 27 and 28 September 1991 in the building of the Supreme Court of Justice. The identity of the five members of the jury was kept secret. The accused and the charges were as follows:

- Colonel Guillermo Alfredo Benavides Moreno, Lieutenant José Ricardo Espinoza Guerra and Second Lieutenant Gonzalo Guevara Cerritos: accused of murder, acts of terrorism, acts preparatory to terrorism and instigation and conspiracy to commit acts of terrorism.
- Lieutenant Yushy René Mendoza Vallecillos: accused of murder, acts of terrorism, acts preparatory to terrorism, instigation and conspiracy to commit acts of terrorism and of being an accessory.
- Deputy Sergeant Antonio Ramiro Avalos Vargas, Deputy Sergeant Tomás Zarpate Castillo, Corporal Angel Pérez Vásquez and Private Oscar Mariano Amaya Grimaldi: accused of murder, acts of terrorism and acts preparatory to terrorism.
- Private Jorge Alberto Sierra Ascencio: tried in absentia for murder.
Lieutenant Colonel Carlos Camilo Hernández Barahona: accused of being an accessory.

The jury had to decide only with respect to the charges of murder and acts of terrorism. The other charges were left to the judge to decide.

Only Colonel Guillermo Alfredo Benavides Moreno and Lieutenant Yushy René Mendoza Vallecillos were found guilty of murder. The judge gave them the maximum sentence, 30 years in prison, which they are currently serving. The judge also found Colonel Benavides and Lieutenant Mendoza guilty of instigation and conspiracy to commit acts of terrorism. Lieutenants Espinoza and Guevara

Cerritos were sentenced to three years for instigation and conspiracy to commit acts of terrorism. Lieutenant Colonel Hernández was also sentenced by the judge to three years for being an accessory and Mendoza Vallecillos was also convicted on that charge. Espinoza, Guevara and Hernández were released and continued in active service in the armed forces.

FINDINGS

The Commission on the Truth makes the following findings and recommendations:

1. There is substantial evidence that on the night of 15 November 1989, then Colonel René Emilio Ponce, in the presence of and in collusion with General Juan Rafael Bustillo, then Colonel Juan Orlando Zepeda, Colonel Inocente Orlando Montano and Colonel Francisco Elena Fuentes, gave Colonel Guillermo Alfredo Benavides the order to kill Father Ignacio Ellacuría and to leave no witnesses. For that purpose, Colonel Benavides was given the use of a unit from the Atlacatl Battalion, which two days previously had been sent to search the priest's residence.

2. There is evidence that, subsequently, all these officers and others, knowing what had happened, took steps to conceal the truth. There is sufficient evidence that General Gilberto Rubio Rubio, knowing what had happened, took steps to conceal the truth.

3. There is full evidence that:

(a) That same night of 15 November, Colonel Guillermo Alfredo Benavides informed the officers at the Military College of the order he had been given for the murder. When he asked whether anyone had any objection, they all remained silent.

(b) The operation was organized by then Major Carlos Camilo Hernández Barahona and carried out by a group of soldiers from the Atlacatl Battalion under the command of Lieutenant José Ricardo Espinoza Guerra and Second Lieutenant Gonzalo Guevara Cerritos, accompanied by Lieutenant Yushy René Mendoza Vallecillos.

4. There is substantial evidence that:

(a) Colonel Oscar Alberto León Linares, Commander of the Atlacatl Battalion, knew of the murder and concealed incriminating evidence.

(b) Colonel Manuel Antonio Rivas Mejía of the Commission for the Investigation of Criminal Acts (CIHD) learnt the facts and concealed the truth and also recommended to Colonel Benavides measures for the destruction of incriminating evidence.

(c) Colonel Nelson Iván López y López, who was assigned to assist in the CIHD investigation, learnt what had happened and concealed the truth.

5. There is full evidence that Rodolfo Antonio Parker Soto, a member of the Special Honour Commission, altered statements in order to conceal the responsibility of senior officers for the murder.

6. The Commission believes that it is unfair that Colonel Guillermo Alfredo Benavides Moreno and Lieutenant Yusshy René Mendoza Vallecillos should still be in prison when the people responsible for planning the murders and the person who gave the order for the murder remain at liberty. In the Commission's view, the request by the Society of Jesus that Colonel Guillermo Alfredo Benavides Moreno and Lieutenant Yusshy René Mendoza Vallecillos be pardoned should be granted by the relevant authorities.