



Ex-Salvadoran General Appeals Deportation Order

FALLS CHURCH, Va. February 6, 2014 (AP)

By MATTHEW BARAKAT Associated Press

In the 1980s, the U.S. government considered Salvadoran Gen. Eugenio Vides Casanova a hero, twice awarding him the Legion of Merit for leading a battle against left-wing rebels in his country. Now, the U.S. government considers him a pariah, and wants him deported for his role in a series of human rights abuses.

Vides Casanova on Thursday appealed his deportation order to the nation's highest immigration court, arguing that his removal would be unfair because the aggressive tactics of the Salvadoran military were tacitly supported by the U.S.

"El Salvador was at the forefront of the battle against communism in our hemisphere," his lawyer, Diego Handel, said during arguments. "The things that happened far from our country during a civil war in which our government was an active participant on the side of the Salvadoran government. ... Any war, there's going to be a lot of deaths, a lot of unfortunate things that happen."

Vides Casanova, who was his country's defense minister, has been living in Florida since immigrating in 1989. In 2012, an immigration judge ruled that he could be deported for his role in multiple acts of killings and torture committed by the Salvadoran military, including the slayings of three American nuns and a lay churchwoman in 1980.

Government lawyer David Landau said U.S. support for the Salvadoran military at the time does not excuse Vides Casanova's actions. He said the record is replete with pleas from U.S. ambassadors and even then-Vice President George H.W. Bush demanding that the military clean up its human rights record.

Instead, Vides Casanova "protects the people who have committed the torture," Landau said.

In one case, a torture victim testified that Vides Casanova was in the room personally while the victim lay bloody from beatings and other torture. In another case, he kept a victim in jail for

years on a false confession that was beaten out of him. The victim confessed he had murdered U.S. military advisor Albert Schaufelberger. The victim languished in prison despite explicit pleas from the U.S. that he be freed, Landau said.

Carolyn Patty Blum, a senior advisor at the Center For Justice and Accountability, a human rights law firm that has pursued civil claims against Vides Casanova and other world leaders accused of torture, said the two victims' stories are "a good representation of what Vides Casanova could have done" to curb abuses had he been so inclined.

As for the murder of the U.S. churchwomen, the judge who heard testimony at Vides Casanova's 2012 deportation trial found that Vides Casanova set up a sham investigation that muddied the waters and delayed justice in the murders.

A three-judge panel of the Board of Immigration Appeals, the nation's highest immigration court, heard Vides Casanova's appeal at its headquarters in Falls Church. Vides Casanova did not attend.

Board members questioned whether Vides Casanova could properly be held responsible for acts committed by his underlings.

"Is he responsible for rogue units? Was his position too far up the chain to control those units?" asked board judge Michael Creppy.

Landau countered that Vides Casanova himself testified at his own trial that he kept tight control over his subordinates.

The board typically issues its rulings within a few months of holding a hearing. While it is the top immigration court, it is technically considered an administrative body and its rulings can typically be appealed in federal courts.

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