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## Torture suit begins for Salvadoran officer

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MEMPHIS, Tenn. -- A former Salvadoran Army colonel was in a U.S. court Monday to defend himself against accusations that his soldiers tortured and killed civilians during El Salvador's civil war in the 1980s.

A civil lawsuit filed against Nicolas Carranza, 72, accuses him of crimes against humanity. A 10-member jury was seated Monday afternoon, with testimony scheduled to begin Tuesday.



Julio Cesar Mendez, 42, reads a poem written on a wall at the "El Despertar" Catholic home of retirees, where a priest and 4 youths were assassinated by the Army at the beginning of the country's civil war in Jan. 1979, San Salvador, El Salvador, Monday, Oct.31, 2005. Former Salvadoran Army colonel Nicolas Carranza is being accused of crimes against humanity by letting soldiers under his command torture and kill civilians regarded as enemies of El Salvador's military-dominated government in the 1980s. (AP Photo/Luis Romero) (Luis Romero - AP)

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"This is a first opportunity for our clients to finally have a chance to say what happened to them, to explain to a jury and to the world," Matthew Eisenbrandt, a lawyer for the Center for Justice and Accountability, said in advance of Monday's court session.

Carranza, who has declined talking about the specific allegations, denies wrongdoing. He became an American citizen and has lived in the Memphis area since 1985.

The lawsuit, filed by five current or former Salvadorans, says Carranza commanded military and police units that took part in a "deliberate reign of state terror" with the "widespread and systematic" use of torture and murder.

In a pretrial ruling, Judge Jon McCalla found that claims of torture or witnessing wrongful deaths by at least four of Carranza's accusers were valid.

Thousands of civilians were arrested during El Salvador's 12-year civil war, and many who were taken away by military or paramilitary forces were killed.

The suit says that experts estimate that while Carranza was in charge of his country's top security forces, 10,000 to 12,000 unarmed civilians were assassinated in 1980 alone.

Carranza was vice minister of defense and public security for El Salvador from October 1979 to January 1981 and director of the Salvadoran Treasury Police from June 1983 to April 1984, it says. News reports from the time describe the Treasury Police as one of the least disciplined of El Salvador's security forces.

Eisenbrandt said he expects the trial to last up to three weeks and include testimony from torture victims and experts on the civil war. One of the first witnesses, he said, is expected to be Robert White, a former U.S. ambassador to El Salvador.

Peace accords at the end of the war led to an amnesty that bars legal action in El Salvador against suspected war criminals.

Eisenbrandt said the lawsuit is the only way his clients have of going after Carranza "to get a finding from a court that he's responsible. That's the most important thing."

The lawsuit, also handled by the Nashville law firm of Bass Berry & Sims, was filed under federal laws allowing U.S. courts to assess damages in human rights violations abroad. The suit seeks unspecified compensatory and punitive damages.

The Center for Justice and Accountability, based in San Francisco, successfully sued two former Salvadoran generals in West Palm Beach, Fla., in 2002.

Eisenbrandt said Carranza's whereabouts were discovered during the litigation of the Florida lawsuit.

When the Memphis suit was filed, Carranza was making no attempt to hide his identity. His telephone number was listed and real estate records were filed in his name.

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On the Net:

Center for Justice and Accountability: <http://www.cja.org>