



PRESS RELEASE

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Lawsuit for Torture, Disappearance, and Summary Execution Filed Against Honduran Intelligence Officer
Residing in Florida

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A high-ranking Honduran military officer living in Florida since 1998, is responsible for the torture and disappearances of Honduran civilians, charges a lawsuit filed today in a Miami federal court by two torture victims and relatives of two of the disappeared.

The victims' lawsuit, filed by the San Francisco-based Center for Justice & Accountability (CJA), claims that former Honduran military intelligence chief Lt. Col. Juan López Grijalba controlled a secretive battalion responsible for widespread human rights abuses in the early 1980's. A 1994 report by Honduras' National Commissioner for the Protection of Human Rights found that it is "beyond question" that the unit, known as "Battalion 3 16," engaged in a "systematic program of disappearances and political murder" between 1981-84.

"The United States should not be a safe haven for foreign officials who ordered or allowed their subordinates to commit torture and political killings," said CJA attorney Joshua Sondheimer. "Officials responsible for human rights abuses in their countries should know that if they come to the United States, they can be held accountable in our courts," he said.

The six plaintiffs in the lawsuit, four of whom are now U.S. citizens, include Oscar and Gloria Reyes, abducted by soldiers wearing black masks in 1982 and subjected to electric shock and beatings in a clandestine torture facility, and Ricardo and Zenaida Velásquez, the son and sister of Manfredo Velásquez, who was abducted by Honduran soldiers in 1981 and has never been seen since. Velásquez is presumed to have been killed, one of the 179 or more civilians "disappeared" in Honduras during the 1980's, according to the National Commissioner's report. Velásquez was a student at the time of his disappearance in 1981.

Velásquez' sister Zenaida, one of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit, came to the United States in 1988, and is now a naturalized U.S. citizen. She is now a social worker in Northern California. Velásquez' son Ricardo, also a plaintiff, was eight years old at the time of his

father's disappearance, and remained in Honduras with his mother and two sisters. He is now a university student in Honduras.

Plaintiff Oscar Reyes earned a master's degree in communications from the University of Minnesota in 1976, and founded and served as director of the school of journalism at the National Autonomous University of Honduras. Reyes and his wife were forced into exile in 1982 to secure their release from prison. Reyes and his family have lived in the United States since that time, and all are naturalized U.S. citizens. Reyes currently lives with his family in northern Virginia, and is the director of a Spanish language newspaper serving the Washington, DC area.

The plaintiffs' lawsuit is based on two federal laws -- the 213-year old Alien Tort Claims Act, and the 1991 Torture Victim Protection Act -- that allow U.S. courts to assess damages against perpetrators of serious human rights violations committed abroad. Federal courts can hear these cases when the alleged perpetrator is living or traveling in the United States.

The Center for Justice & Accountability, which represents plaintiffs in the case, works to end the impunity of human rights abusers by, among other means, representing survivors in lawsuits based under these laws. CJA is joined in the suit by Florida attorney Robert G. Kerrigan of Kerrigan, Estess, Rankin & McLeod.

The Center for Justice & Accountability was founded in 1998 with support from Amnesty International USA and the United Nations Voluntary Fund for the Victims of Torture to help victims of severe human rights abuses seek justice against perpetrators living in and traveling to the United States.