

War crime suspect found in Everett

Former Salvadoran official accused of role in Jesuit priests' killings

By [Mark Arsenault](#)

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EVERETT - A former Salvadoran government minister accused of colluding in the infamous killing of six Jesuit priests in El Salvador two decades ago has been living a quiet life in a modest apartment building in Everett, says a human rights group pursuing a legal case against him.

Inocente Orlando Montano, apparently living in Massachusetts for years under his own name, is among 20 former military officers charged with conspiring to kill the priests in fresh indictments from Spain.

The international indictments issued in May seek justice for the clergymen, five of them Spaniards; their housekeeper; and her 16-year-old daughter, who were roused at night from their beds on the campus of Central American University in San Salvador and executed by an elite unit of the Salvadoran military.

Most of those accused of the notorious war crime have never faced justice.

A man who answered the door at Montano's apartment on Irving Street last week said the former Salvadoran army colonel was not at home, but promised to leave a message. The message was not returned, and the next day Montano's name had been removed from his mailbox. No one answered the door at the apartment on three other occasions over the past several days. Several neighbors said they did not know Montano.

In 1993, a United Nations "truth commission" that investigated the clergy killings named Montano, a former government vice minister of public safety, as one of the top leaders who participated in a meeting to plot the assassination of Father Ignacio Ellacuria, the university's rector. The government suspected Ellacuria of supporting leftist rebels. The unit dispatched to kill Ellacuria was ordered to leave no witnesses, according to the commission's report.

"I find it unbelievable and unconscionable that somebody involved in this crime is in the United States," said US Representative James McGovern, a Worcester Democrat who helped investigate the Jesuit slayings 20 years ago as an aide to J. Joseph Moakley, then a congressman. Moakley, of South Boston, had been appointed to lead a congressional task force to look into the killings in the early 1990s.

“It’s still this terrible memory,” said McGovern, who knew three of the slain priests personally through congressional work on refugee issues. “I had never been involved so closely with something so horrific. That case still is a strong force in me, saying that human rights is something we need to stand up for.”

The Jesuit massacre on Nov. 16, 1989, made international headlines. Photos of slain priests were shocking even for El Salvador, which at the time was deep into a 12-year civil war riddled with atrocities. About 75,000 people died in the conflict between government forces and the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, a collection of rebel groups.

In a June phone interview with a Salvadoran Internet newspaper, Montano said that the indictment “is all based on lies” and that the only high-level meetings in which he participated concerned the defense of San Salvador, which was under rebel attack at the time. He told the news site El Faro that he was in Massachusetts and had been living in the same place for the past 10 years.

Montano was located in Everett by The Center for Justice & Accountability, a human rights organization based in San Francisco. In 2008, the center filed suit against the 20 defendants in Spain, which led to the new indictments. The group used a private detective to confirm Montano’s address before presenting the information to the judge in Spain, said Almudena Bernabeu, a lawyer who brought the lawsuit for the Center for Justice. At least one other former Salvadoran officer charged in the indictment is in the United States; he lives in California, she said.

Nine of the men accused in the indictments turned themselves in to authorities in El Salvador on Aug. 7. Salvadoran courts will decide if they will be extradited.

Whether any of the defendants will ever appear in a Spanish courtroom is an open question.

“Sometimes I expect little from these cases but at the same time I have to be optimistic,” said Bernabeu. She hoped the US Department of Justice would arrest and extradite suspects in the United States, but three months after the indictments, no arrests have been made.

Because of that, she said, “I’m a little more pessimistic. But you never, ever know.”

The Department of Justice, through a spokeswoman, declined to comment on the case.

Members of the US Congress are urging the Obama administration to cooperate with authorities in Spain.

McGovern said he did not previously know that an alleged conspirator was living in Massachusetts. But he had contacted the Department of Justice about the case, urging action to assist the Spanish court in tracking down suspects, he said.

Four US senators - Tom Harkin of Iowa, Patrick Leahy of Vermont, Barbara Boxer of California, and John F. Kerry of Massachusetts - wrote to the Department of State in July, asking Secretary

of State Hillary Rodham Clinton to “make every possible effort to ensure that the United States cooperates fully in the pending legal proceedings” against the defendants in the Jesuit massacre. The letter does not mention the location of any of the former Salvadoran officers, but states that at least one “may be living in the United States.”

Responding to the senators, Joseph Macmanus, acting assistant secretary of state, offered few details, writing that the department is monitoring the case, and “will work closely with the Department of Justice to ensure that any request for assistance from the Spanish government receives appropriate consideration.”

Kerry said this week that the United States should support the Spanish court. “All these years later, I just want to see justice done,” he said in a statement to the Globe.

The National Court of Spain levied the indictments in the case under the principle of “universal jurisdiction,” which says crimes against humanity are so heinous they can be prosecuted across international lines. Spanish courts are known for applying the principle in far-reaching international indictments. Augusto Pinochet, the former Chilean dictator, was arrested in 1998 on human rights charges in London, for example, on a warrant issued by a Spanish court. He was not extradited.

Nine members of the Salvadoran military were originally charged in El Salvador in the Jesuit killings. In a 1991 prosecution widely criticized as a sham, only two went to jail, including Colonel Guillermo Alfredo Benavides, who was charged with giving the order to shoot the priests.

Even before the trial had run its course, Moakley’s congressional task force found that Salvadoran investigators “made little effort to determine whether senior military officers other than Colonel Benavides might have had a role in ordering or covering up the crime,” according to its 1990 report.

The UN truth commission later found “substantial evidence” that high-level government officials, including Montano, colluded the day before the killings to order Benavides to kill Father Ellacuria and any witnesses.

Benavides was freed under a 1993 amnesty law, approved after the peace accord that ended the country’s civil war.