

Salvadoran Cites U.S. Backing of Violence in Deportation Appeal

A lawyer for the former leader of El Salvador's National Guard says his client shouldn't be deported when no American officials have been held accountable for their role in El Salvador's bloody civil war.

By Lalita Clozel February 6, 2014, 10:38 p.m.

WASHINGTON — A former Salvadoran general accused of overseeing the torture and killing of thousands of civilians during a 12-year civil war appealed a U.S. deportation order Thursday on the grounds that his nation's anti-communist campaign was backed and funded by the American government.

An attorney for Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, who was El Salvador's defense minister and leader of the National Guard in the 1980s, repeatedly cited the U.S. support for his country's right-wing government during its war against leftist guerrillas. The conflict left 75,000 Salvadorans dead and displaced 500,000.

"The United States government was an active participant on the side of the El Salvadoran government," said attorney Diego Handel on behalf of Vides Casanova, who did not attend Thursday's hearing at a [Falls Church](#), Va., immigration office. Handel said it was unfair to deport Vides Casanova, believed to be in his late 70s, particularly when no U.S. officials have been held accountable for their role in the violence.

In 2012, a Florida immigration court ordered the deportation of Vides Casanova, making him the first high-ranking foreign official told to leave under a 2004 law that made it easier to expel human rights violators.

Vides Casanova emigrated to Florida in 1989. With glowing recommendations from top-ranking U.S. officials, he was granted permanent residency and lived a quiet retirement, collecting a pension from El Salvador.

But after the civil war ended, Vides Casanova battled numerous lawsuits from victims of the conflict.

The Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights pursued him on behalf of the families of four American churchwomen who had been brutally raped and slain by members of the Salvadoran National Guard in 1980. In 2000, a Florida jury found that he and another former defense minister, Jose Guillermo Garcia, were not liable for the killings.

But two years later, another case filed by the Center for Justice and Accountability on behalf of three torture victims residing in the U.S., resulted in a \$55-million civil judgment.

The civil lawsuits helped trigger deportation proceedings. In 2012, an immigration judge issued a 152-page order that held Vides Casanova responsible for six different cases of torture and murder, as well as "the extrajudicial killings of countless civilians committed by the Salvadoran Armed Forces and Salvadoran National Guard" while under his command.

If a three-judge immigration panel rejects his appeal, Vides Casanova can take his case to federal court.

Vides Casanova's fate is uncertain if he is deported. Although he was granted immunity under a 1993 amnesty law, El Salvador's Supreme Court is considering overturning the law, and there's a push to reopen investigations into crimes committed during the civil war.

At the hearing, his attorney focused on U.S. involvement. It is estimated that the U.S. spent more than \$7 billion in financial and military support for El Salvador's right-wing government.

Carolyn Patty Blum, attorney for the Center for Justice and Accountability, said that Vides Casanova's claim implied that he should not be held responsible for any of his actions "because he somehow had U.S. backing.... I find it really offensive."

Robert White, a former U.S. ambassador to El Salvador who had invited two of the churchwomen to dinner on the eve of their assassination, said there was no excuse for Vides Casanova's role in the violence, but criticized the U.S. role in the conflict.

"It would be useful for us to examine our own record because it keeps coming back to haunt us," he said in an interview.

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