

U.S. moves against two Salvadoran military men in landmark cases



By Tracy Wilkinson

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U.S. authorities on Wednesday acted against two former Salvadoran military men who had lived freely and openly in the United States for years despite allegations they were involved in some of the most egregious atrocities committed in their homeland.

Carlos Vides Casanova, a former defense minister and retired general, was deported by immigration officials to El Salvador after living in Florida for nearly 26 years, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency said in a statement.

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Vides had exhausted appeals after an immigration court in 2012 found him “removable” because he had “committed, ordered, incited, assisted or otherwise participated in acts of torture and extrajudicial killing,” ICE said.

Also Wednesday, U.S. authorities cleared the way for retired Col. Inocente Montano to be extradited to Spain, where he is expected to stand trial in the 1989 slaying of Jesuit priests in San Salvador.

Vides and Montano had been iconic cases, targets of long legal campaigns by human rights attorneys seeking to hold senior officials accountable for killings and torture committed during the 12-year civil war in El Salvador, which ended in 1992.

“This is so significant, from an international criminal justice perspective ... and for the movement against impunity,” said Carolyn Patty Blum, senior legal advisor at the San Francisco-based Center for Justice and Accountability, which brought civil suits against both men.

The actions represented a “historic moment for victims and survivors” of the abuses of the war, Blum said in a telephone interview from New York.

Montano, who had lived in the U.S. for more than a decade, was serving time in a North Carolina prison for lying to immigration authorities who granted him legal status in the country.

In its action Wednesday, the U.S. government sought permission to grant Spain’s request for Montano’s extradition there. A federal judge will make the final determination, but Blum and others expect that he will soon be on trial.

Six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her teenage daughter were killed by Salvadoran soldiers who, toward the end of the civil war, raided the university where the clerics taught. Five of the priests were Spaniards, which gives Spain standing in the case to prosecute those responsible.

Previous court testimony had implicated Montano, vice minister of public security at the time, in planning meetings before the nighttime raid and commanded some of the troops involved.

In court hearings involving Vides, once a darling of the U.S. administration of the 1980s, he was tied to several especially heinous crimes, including the 1980 rape and killing of four American church women intercepted as they drove from the San Salvador airport.

He was deported under a 2004 law that allows removal of immigrants who are suspected of committing egregious human rights abuses in their own countries.

ICE said it has removed 740 “known or suspected human rights violators” since the law went into effect.

Vides’ return to El Salvador raises questions about that country’s amnesty law. Amnesty was granted to both the military and the leftist guerrillas they were battling once the war ended, and so most crimes have gone unpunished. There is a movement afoot now to rescind the amnesty.

www.latimes.com/world/mexico-americas/la-fg-us-salvadoran-military-men-20150408-story.html

