

U.S. wants Salvadoran ex-colonel to face murder charges in '89 deaths

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Former El Salvadoran Col. Inocente Orlando Montano (left) departs federal court in Boston, Mass., on Aug. 22, 2013, following the first day of a sentencing hearing on immigration charges. Montano was separately indicted in Spain in 2011 for his alleged role in the 1989 slayings of six Jesuit priests.

WASHINGTON — Inocente Orlando Montano Morales went from elite military training in Georgia and a high-ranking position in El Salvador to a lowly prison cell in North Carolina.

Now the Justice Department wants to pack off the 72-year-old Salvadoran former army colonel to face murder charges in Spain for his alleged role in a 1989 massacre in El Salvador. The new charges reopen a notorious chapter in Central American history, and they come just days before Montano Morales is set to be freed from the privately run Winton, N.C., prison that's currently his home.

“The United States has been distancing itself from known human rights perpetrators,” said Maria Luisa Rosal, a field organizer with the human rights organization SOA Watch, adding that “we do welcome this news, and we would like to see this happen in other cases, as well.”

In an extradition complaint filed at U.S. District Court in Raleigh, federal prosecutors explain that Spanish authorities intend to prosecute Montano Morales in connection with “terrorist acts involving the murder of five Spanish Jesuit priests” in El Salvador on Nov. 16, 1989. A Spanish arrest warrant for Montano Morales was issued in 2011.

The killings took place amid a brutal civil war pitting the Salvadoran military against the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, known as the FMLN. The slain Spanish priests allegedly were targeted because they’d advocated peace talks between the rebels and the government.

A sixth priest, as well as a housekeeper and the housekeeper’s daughter, were also killed in the attack. These other victims were natives of El Salvador.

“The Jesuits massacre case is especially important for El Salvador, a country where justice for the victims has been long denied,” said Almudena Bernabeu, an attorney with the Center for Justice & Accountability, a human rights group.

The center and a Spanish human rights organization filed the 2008 complaint against Montano Morales in Spanish court that led to the criminal charges for which he now faces extradition.

In a previous legal filing, Montano Morales declared through his attorney that he’d “had no hand” in the murders of the priests.

Montano Morales is nearing the end of a 21-month prison sentence imposed following his 2012 guilty plea to immigration fraud and perjury charges in the U.S. He’s set for release next week from the low-security Rivers Correctional Institution, in the northeastern part of North Carolina. Those charges arose over false statements he’d made to U.S. immigration authorities when he applied for temporary protected status in 2002, in an effort to avoid returning to El Salvador.

El Salvador’s onetime vice minister for defense and public safety, Montano Morales graduated in 1970 from the since-renamed School of the Americas, then located in Panama. The school is now at Fort Benning, Ga., and is called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

Montano Morales also trained with U.S. special forces at Fort Benning, and his defense attorneys have previously stressed how he and his Salvadoran colleagues worked closely with U.S. officials.

“Mr. Montano is a man of humble beginnings who obtained an education and rose through the ranks of the Salvadoran military out of a true sense of patriotism,” his defense attorneys wrote in 2013.

While serving as vice minister from 1989 to 1992, Montano Morales belonged to what Stanford University Professor Terry Lynn Karl called the inner circle of the country’s military rulers. He oversaw El Salvador’s National Police, the Treasury Police and the National Guard.

“His appointment . . . coincided with a strong resurgence of extrajudicial killings, torture, deaths in custody and urban terror campaigns by the security forces,” Karl noted in a report prepared for Montano Morales’ original sentencing in 2013.

The extradition complaint alleges that Montano Morales helped oversee a government radio station that issued threats urging the murder of the Jesuit priests. The day before the murders, Montano Morales allegedly participated in meetings during which a fellow officer gave the order to kill the leader of the Jesuits and leave no witnesses.

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<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2015/04/08/262504/us-wants-salvadoran-ex-colonel.html#storylink=cpy>