

National Public Radio

[The Journey of Dr. Ramogoza - From Weekend Edition Saturday, November 27, 2004](#)

Dr. Juan Ramogoza, who provided medical care to El Salvador's poor, was imprisoned and tortured in 1980. He later fled to the United States. Two years ago he sued two Salvadoran generals for his suffering, and won. Now his homeland is honoring him as a "Distinguished Salvadoran Humanist." Ramogoza speaks with [NPR's Scott Simon](#).

Scott Simon: On December 2nd, Dr. Juan Romagoza will return to El Salvador to be honored by the General Assembly as a Distinguished Salvadoran Humanitarian. Dr. Romagoza was tortured in 1980, fled to Mexico, and eventually reached the United States. In 2002, he successfully sued two generals who were responsible for his torture. This was the first successful lawsuit under the Torture Victim Protection Act. Dr. Romagoza is now the Executive Director of La Clinica del Pueblo. The interpreter is Sally Hanlon

Q: Take us back to 1980, where were you? How did you collide with the authorities?

A: I was working in El Salvador and surrounding cities providing medical health care. Providing such care was very dangerous. Colleagues of mine were hunted down and killed. They said the refugees did not deserve health care services because they were coming from areas where there was conflict.

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I was machine gunned and wounded, arrested, and tortured.

The two generals are Vides Casanova and Garcia. These were leaders, the highest ranking military officials.

Q: What was the trial like for you, after all these years?

A: This trial was the culmination of a healing process for me together with my community. Personally I was deeply effected by the mistreatment. Emotional wounds take a lifetime to heal, or never heal. I was searching for avenues for my community to heal, my people too had been wounded, scarred. I think everyone who has suffered such a plight should have the right to face those who wounded them.

Q: Salvadorans who came to the U.S. who were part of ruling oligarchy didn't think this suit was a very good idea.

A: Yes, it is true. This lawsuit was an extreme or severe measure, but I felt that it was absolutely essential to my healing and the healing of my people.

Q: Were you threatened during your trial?

A: Yes, I did receive threats. I received phone calls, letters, a number of threats. But I believed that this had to be done.

Q: How does it happen that you will return to El Salvador in September as a distinguished Salvadoran humanist?

A: It does seem ironic to be doing the same work that I did 20 years ago.

It is a sign of the country's maturity, a sign of dealing with things that need to be worked through, for those who were hunted down, lost their lives. A sign of a window, a window that is opening, a sign of a willingness to deal with these things now, and perhaps to recover our dignity, build up our judiciary. I think it's a positive sign for our people

There have been several steps forward – now we can vote in elections, have different parties, not be killed for that. There are many things that need to be resolved, particularly

the poverty, which is what gave rise to the war. It's a violent society. People don't have access to what they need to live, and the big capitalists are not controlled

Q: What does it mean that all these years later Gen Vides Casanova is branded as being criminally responsible and you are recognized as a distinguished humanitarian?

This award is given me in a representative sense. There has been a continuity in my life and the lives of others. I fled with so many others. I was hidden in a truck load of onions.

What we were doing then was seen as a crime, terrorism, now these same acts are seen as acts of compassion and healing.

Q: When you walk into the General Assembly in December you won't have to be hidden in a truckfull of onions this time.

A: Yes, now I will have a chance to tell what humanism means to me. To be able to share the inspiration for my actions then and now: the martyrs – Archbishop Romero, the Jesuits, thousands of healthcare workers. These people inspired me then and continue to inspire me.

Scott Simon: Dr. Juan Romagoza is Executive Director of La Clinica del Pueblo here in Washington DC.