

The New York Times

VICTIM LINKS RETIRED GENERAL TO TORTURE IN EL SALVADOR WAR

June 25, 2002
By David Gonzalez

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla., June 24 - The trial of two retired Salvadoran generals in a two-decade-old torture case opened here today with a witness singling out one of them as a participant in a brutal 24-day interrogation.

In a voice that sometimes cracked with emotion, the witness, Dr. Juan Romagoza, said Gen. Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova was present during the weeks in which he was beaten repeatedly and subjected to electric shocks by members of El Salvador's military.

The federal civil suit against General Vides and Gen. José Guillermo García, who have both lived in the United States since 1989, is the second they have faced in this court. They were cleared of similar charges in an October 2000 suit brought by relatives of four American churchwomen raped and killed by the Salvadoran military in 1980.

Today's suit was filed under the Torture Victims Protection Act, which seeks to hold responsible commanders whose troops commit atrocities. The plaintiffs are Dr. Romagoza and two other people who say they were tortured in El Salvador during that era.

The jury in the churchwomen's case found that the generals did not have control over the troops who had carried out the crimes against the women. But that case relied heavily on declassified State Department cables expressing American concern over atrocities linked to military units of the American-backed government.

This case, by contrast, is expected to rest on details provided by those who say they were victimized. About 75,000 people died during El Salvador's 12 year civil war, which ended in 1992 and resulted in an amnesty for those involved in the armed conflict.

"I was thinking why there is no justice for all the victims of this war in El Salvador," testified Dr. Romagoza, who now directs a health clinic in Washington. "I, who am a survivor of that terror, am lucky to be alive. I have a lot of friends and fellow doctors who were killed by the National Guard, death squads and the military. I am one of the few who can tell their story."

General García was minister of defense in December 1980, when Dr. Romagoza was captured by the military and taken to the headquarters of the National Guard.

Dr. Romagoza said General Vides, then a colonel commanding El Salvador's National Guard, repeatedly asked him during the interrogation about his family's ties to the leftist

guerrillas engaged in a civil war against the government. Dr. Romagoza, who says his family had no such ties, said he later recognized General Vides by his voice and clothing, which the doctor was able to see through a gap in his blindfold.

In their previous trial, the generals insisted that they had done nothing wrong, and that they had tried to reform the military and establish democratic institutions, but were undermined by rogue troops. General Vides testified in the previous case that he was aware that torture had been committed at the National Guard headquarters, but that he had issued orders banning it when he assumed office.

But James Green, the lead counsel for the plaintiffs, contended today that the war's turbulent climate was no excuse for such treatment.

"There may have been a civil war, but there was not a suspension of civilization," Mr. Green said in his opening argument. "There was no license to torture."

Dr. Romagoza said he had been working with other physicians treating refugees displaced by the civil war and had been at a makeshift clinic in the northern part of the country when he and his colleagues were fired upon by men dressed in civilian clothes.

He said he was taken to the National Guard headquarters in San Salvador, where he was kept blindfolded and in his undershorts while being subjected to regular beatings. He said that a gunshot wound to his ankle, sustained during the attack on the clinic, went untreated and that worms wiggled around the wound.

At one point, he said, wire was used to suspend him by his hands while he was beaten. He said that electric clamps were applied to his tongue, ears and testicles, and that he was later shot in the left arm, which he said he was told was to mark him for life as a leftist.

Dr. Romagoza, who had been a surgeon, said that the injuries left him with no feeling in seven fingers.

He said that at one point the beatings eased up when he was visited by the man he was told was "the big boss," or "the colonel." He said the officer, whose face he could not see, demanded to know about any links his uncle, also a colonel in the Salvadoran Army, had with the guerrillas. Dr. Romagoza told him there were none. He said his inquisitor joked about how ill the doctor appeared.

"He said I looked like a dead man already," Dr. Romagoza said, "that I stank of death."

Ultimately, Dr. Romagoza said, after he was forced to lie in an open casket for two days, he was released to his uncle. He said that Colonel Vides stood next to his uncle at that time, and that Dr. Romagoza later recognized the colonel's voice from hearing him on the news and that he was "almost 90 percent certain" that it was the same voice.

During a brief cross-examination, Kurt Klaus Jr., the lawyer for the generals, suggested that Dr. Romagoza had brought his lawsuit at the urging of human rights advocates.

"I believe in democracy and justice," Dr. Romagoza replied. "That is why I want it to be protected."