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EX-ENVOY FAULTS SALVADORAN ARMY OVER TORTURE

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By David Gonzalez

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - Testifying in a civil suit brought by three Salvadorans who accuse their country's military of torturing them two decades ago, a former U.S. ambassador to El Salvador said Tuesday that the failure of military leaders to rein in murderous troops had been the biggest obstacle to democracy.

The envoy, Robert E. White, a career diplomat who served in El Salvador in 1980 and 1981, said that senior officers not only ignored repeated American admonishments but even appeared to encourage assassinations of civilians in the name of fighting leftist insurgents.

The defendants in this case, both retired generals, were colonels at the time, and held relevant government positions: Jose Guillermo Garcia was defense minister and Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova was director of the National Guard. The suit against them was brought under the Torture Victims Protection Act, which seeks accountability from commanders whose troops commit atrocities.

"It was our analysis that the gross and consistent pattern of human rights violations was undermining the attempt to bring democracy to El Salvador because people had been abused for many decades and were demanding change," said White, now the president of the Center for International Policy, a Washington research organization. "Unless the military could deliver on that change, democracy would fail."

At issue in the current case is whether the retired generals knew of the abuses and could have used their authority to stop them. White's testimony, which drew on declassified State Department and Central Intelligence Agency cables, portrayed the two defendants as commanders in firm control but unresponsive to American entreaties.

He said that after a Spanish television crew showed him videotape of soldiers entering a school and shooting several teenagers, he confronted Garcia, then a colonel and the defense minister, who shrugged it off. Similar complaints about military involvement in the murder of six opposition politicians went nowhere, he said.

The retired generals said in depositions taken last year that they did not recall any American official's warning them about rights abuses by the military. Nor had their own officer corps informed them, they said.

"I never had knowledge that torture was performed in the armed forces," Garcia said. "If it had been that way, there would have been the necessary measures to control it."

However, White testified to frequent meetings with the commanders and other senior officers, in which he urged them to stop killing labor leaders, church activists, suspected guerrilla sympathizers and young people wanting democratic change. In one meeting, he wrote afterward in cable, he confronted the defense minister about specific officers suspected of abuse.

"Colonel Garcia admitted that the excesses were grave and that he had a good idea who was responsible," the envoy wrote. "Colonel Garcia made no promise, implicit or explicit, to put an end to the official violence."

Earlier in his testimony, White said the United States, which sent millions of dollars in military aid to El Salvador, saw military reform as critical to calming the country.

"We wanted to support the military," he said. "That would offer the best guarantee there would be stability in the country. But the way to achieve stability is not to wage war on your own people."