

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

Florida jury convicts 2 Salvadoran generals of atrocities \$54.6 million awarded to three torture victims

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Wednesday, July 24, 2002; Page A - 12

Reopening a bloody wound from two decades ago, a U.S. federal court in Florida on Tuesday found two retired Salvadoran generals responsible for torture, rape and other atrocities committed during El Salvador's civil war.

The jury in West Palm Beach ordered Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova and Jose Guillermo Garcia to pay \$54.6 million to three torture victims.

"This is a great day for all Salvadorans," said Carlos Mauricio, a science teacher at Balboa High School in San Francisco who was one of the three victims. "At last we are going to get justice. We have sent a loud message that torture is not permitted, and there's no impunity anymore."

The other plaintiffs were Neris Gonzalez, a church worker who testified that she had been tortured and raped by soldiers, and Juan Romagoza, a physician who ran a health program in the countryside, who said he had been tortured at National Guard headquarters.

During the four-week trial, Mauricio testified about his repeated torture in 1983 at the hands of national police officials who accused him of being a leftist guerrilla. Mauricio, at that time a professor at the University of El Salvador, was beaten repeatedly and was hung by his hands for long periods of time. He fled to exile in San Francisco soon after he was released from custody.

Tuesday's ruling was strange justice for Mauricio, because his torturers were supported by the same U.S. government that now has given him redress.

The generals each held top posts, including minister of defense, in the rightist Salvadoran government's brutal war against Marxist guerrillas. Tens of thousands of civilians were killed by army-linked death squads and counterinsurgency sweeps. The Reagan administration saw the war as a crusade against communism and sent more than \$1 billion in aid to the Salvadoran government despite loud criticism from many members of Congress.

Both generals were trained at the U.S. Army's School of the Americas, and both received U.S. Legion of Merit awards from the State Department. They retired to the Miami area in 1989.

The victims sued under two federal laws that allow torture victims to seek redress in U.S. courts, even if the offenses occurred elsewhere. The jury found that the

generals had known their troops were torturing and murdering civilians but failed to try to stop it or punish those responsible.

The Salvadoran and U.S. governments made no comment about the ruling.

Among the estimated 150,000 Salvadorans in the Bay Area -- many of whom arrived as refugees fleeing the army's abuses -- Tuesday was a great day.

"I've been getting calls all day from people who are happy about the outcome," said Ramon Cardona, executive director of the Central American Resources Center, a San Francisco social services agency. "There's a sense of relief and justice for people who suffered so much persecution."

Among these war-scarred Salvadorans, Cardona said, "there's a lingering effect that has not brought healthy closure to the emotional damage on the Salvadoran psyche. This is a major step."

Cardona speaks from personal history. Three of his cousins were captured and killed by marauding Salvadoran troops in the 1980s. He said, "My entire family in El Salvador, right now I know they're celebrating today's decision, and there are so many thousands of others."

Tuesday's ruling could open the door to prosecution of other foreigners for rights abuses that occurred abroad.

Amnesty International has estimated that hundreds of torturers and other serious human rights abusers are living in the United States and that hundreds more are granted visitors' visas each year.

"I think there will be some nervous people following this jury award," said Constance de la Vega, a professor of international human-rights law at the University of San Francisco. "If you're a former torturer from another country, you might want to leave the United States before somebody serves you with a lawsuit."

Sandra Coliver, executive director of the Center for Justice and Accountability, a San Francisco nonprofit that organized the plaintiffs' case, said the verdict was one of very few instances since World War II in which a foreign commander had been held liable for war crimes committed by his troops.

Coliver said it was particularly significant for El Salvador, where no officers or troops were imprisoned for wartime abuses, and a broad amnesty was given to all combatants in 1993 after the peace accords that ended the war.

The ruling was ironic, she noted, because the Bush administration has strongly rejected U.S. participation in the International Criminal Court, which opened earlier this month in the Netherlands to try war crimes.

"Although the United States doesn't want to recognize the jurisdiction of international courts, we applaud Congress' willingness to empower our courts to interpret and apply international law," she said.

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