

Modesto man accused in '80 slaying of bishop

Harriet Chiang, Chronicle Legal Affairs Writer

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A Modesto resident was accused in a lawsuit Tuesday of playing a key role in the 1980 assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, an outspoken critic of human rights abuses in El Salvador.

The lawsuit, filed in U.S. District Court in Fresno, said Alvaro Saravia was a top aide to reputed Salvadoran death squad leader Roberto d'Aubuisson when Romero was slain. He allegedly obtained weapons and vehicles and other materials in preparation for the assassination, according to the suit filed by the Center for Justice and Accountability, a nonprofit group in San Francisco, on behalf of a relative of Romero.

The relative's name was not released for security reasons, plaintiff's lawyers said.

Romero, who was revered throughout El Salvador as a leading human rights defender, was shot to death while celebrating Mass at a hospital. Salvadoran officials investigated his murder, but no one was ever charged in the slaying.

Saravia could not be reached Tuesday for comment.

"We think the lawsuit is of historic importance because the assassination of Romero is a watershed in Salvadoran history," said Joshua Sondheimer, the center's litigation director.

"If they could kill him without suffering any consequences of being held accountable, they could kill anybody," said Nico van Aelstyn, a San Francisco lawyer who worked with the center on the suit.

Beatriz Manz, an associate professor at UC Berkeley who specializes in Central America, noted that at the time of Romero's assassination, nuns and priests were being persecuted and murdered by the Salvadoran military.

But in a country overwhelmingly Catholic, she said, no one thought anyone would go so far as to kill a bishop. "It was sacrilege. It broke all the rules," she said.

Manz called Tuesday's lawsuit significant because it may embolden the families of other victims in Guatemala, Chile and elsewhere, as well as El Salvador, to take legal steps. "Now, after so many years, relatives of the disappeared, of the victims that were killed are becoming more assertive," she said.

Romero's assassination occurred during a period of increasing militarization and human rights violations in El Salvador, and helped catapult the country into a bloody civil war. Some 80,000 civilians were reportedly killed.



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Saravia had long been considered a suspect in Romero's slaying. After conducting separate investigations, the U.N. Commission on the Truth for El Salvador and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights both concluded that Saravia was involved in planning and carrying out the assassination.

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