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## **\$10m for an archbishop's murder**

KEVIN HURLEY

THE family of an archbishop assassinated while celebrating Mass in El Salvador has won \$10m (£5.4m) damages from a retired air force captain who ordered his murder 24 years ago.

Archbishop Oscar Romero was killed by a sniper as he performed Mass in 1980, an incident which helped plunge the Central American state into a bloody 12-year civil war.

No one had been held responsible for his death until the clergyman's family filed a lawsuit under a little-known law that allows foreign nationals with US connections to be sued for crimes such as torture or genocide.

A Californian court was asked to determine whether evidence presented was enough to show that Alvaro Rafael Saravia, a retired Salvadoran air force captain, could be held responsible for Romero's death.

It was argued that Saravia conspired to commit the killing by providing the sniper with a gun, payment and transport.

In a landmark ruling, Judge Oliver Wanger sitting in Fresno ordered Saravia to pay the plaintiffs \$2.5m in compensatory damages and an additional \$7.5m in punitive damages to end the Romero family's long fight for justice.

In a highly charged courtroom, Wanger told about 100 spectators, many of them Salvadoran: "To be liable for the killing of a human being, you don't have to pull the trigger."

The lawsuit was brought by one of Romero's siblings, who has not been identified because the judge agreed that there was still a significant danger of retaliation.

A United Nations truth commission linked Saravia and others to Romero's death. Immediately after the commission's findings were made public, an amnesty law was passed in 1993 which stated Saravia could not be tried in his home country.

An investigation into the murder, based partly on a diary found on Saravia that contained notes about the conspiracy to kill Romero, was launched by Judge Ramirez Amaya until he was forced to flee the country after death threats.

Saravia did not respond to the lawsuit filed by the San Francisco-based Center for Justice and Accountability, although the judge ruled that an adequate effort had been made to reach him and that the case should continue without him.

Romero was preaching a sermon about the violent death of a peasant who had been organising other workers in El Salvador when the gunman struck on March 24, 1980.

Amado Garay, a chauffeur to Saravia, was under orders from his boss to transport a man to the church where Romero was celebrating Mass.

Unbeknown to Garay, his passenger was armed with a rifle with a telescopic lens. Garay was ordered to crouch down in the car as the man in his back seat fired one single shot into the church.

When the driver returned the sniper to the house where Saravia was waiting, they found the air force captain listening to the news of the murder.

Romero was a charismatic and influential figure in the turbulent politics of El Salvador at the end of the 1970s. As an outspoken defender of the rights of the poor and a critic of the right-wing death squads, he was the target of numerous death threats.

The day before his assassination, Romero addressed his sermon to soldiers involved in the death squads responsible for thousands of murders in the strife-torn country.

The following day, Saravia met with the reputed leader of the death squads, Roberto D'Aubuisson, who is believed to have helped orchestrate the murder. He died in 1992.

The death of 63-year-old Romero was a seminal event, not only for El Salvador but for international followers of his liberation theology. Romero's radical interpretation of the Gospels tried to reconcile Marxist philosophy and Christian social thinking.

The cleric was a tireless campaigner who highlighted the appalling social conditions in his homeland to others across the world.

A month before his death he wrote to US President Jimmy Carter, asking him to suspend financial aid to El Salvador.

Carter, who sent millions in aid and riot equipment to the Salvadoran military as well as US trainers to instruct the armed forces, suspended support months later, but only after paramilitaries murdered four nuns in an atrocity that shocked the world.

Robert White, the former US ambassador to El Salvador, had heard Romero preach the day before his death, when the priest had appealed directly to the soldiers involved in the killings.

"Brothers, you came from your own people," he told them. "You are killing your own brothers. The Church cannot remain silent before such an abomination. In the name of God, I implore you, I beg you, I command you: stop the killing."

At Romero's funeral in San Salvador, more than 40 people were killed by soldiers firing on the crowds of poor people paying homage to their champion outside the capital's cathedral.

A quarter of a century on, the clergyman remains a powerful and influential figure even in death. Thousands of pilgrims travel to San Salvador to visit his tomb and to see the small three-room house in which he lived, next to a chapel in the grounds of a hospital.

Authorities in the US now have to track down Saravia, who is in his 60s, to demand the damages, but his whereabouts and his assets are currently unknown. He is thought to have initially entered the US on a visitor's visa and stayed in the country when it expired.

In 1987, he was detained in Miami when Salvadoran prosecutors sought his extradition in connection with the murder of the archbishop. But the extradition request was withdrawn and he was released.

In the early 1990s he is thought to have moved from Florida to California, settling in Modesto. He set up a car business but fled the area, leaving a trail of debts and lawsuits.

The Catholic Church has since taken the first step toward the canonization of Romero, who is still revered for his support of the poor and those working for social change.

The UN estimates that between the late 1970s and 1992, right-wing death squads killed 75,000 civilians in El Salvador.