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## Suit Filed in '80 Death Of Salvadoran Bishop Ex-Aide of Rightist Leader Implicated

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A San Francisco-based human rights group filed a landmark lawsuit yesterday in the case of slain Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, accusing a former Salvadoran Air Force officer of involvement in the 1980 assassination of the revered Roman Catholic leader.

The suit, filed by the Center for Justice and Accountability in federal court in Fresno, Calif., accuses Alvaro Rafael Saravia, 57, of playing a key role in organizing the assassination, perhaps the most notorious killing during a decade of repression in which as many as 75,000 people were reported slain in El Salvador by right-wing death squads.

Saravia, a former right-hand man of Salvadoran rightist leader Roberto D'Aubuisson, moved to the United States in the mid-1980s and was last reported living in Modesto, Calif., where he owned an auto parts store. He was arrested in 1987 by U.S. immigration agents at the behest of Salvadoran prosecutors, who requested his extradition in the Romero case. But the extradition effort was eventually dropped, and Saravia was released after spending 14 months in jail on immigration charges. Calls to his last known address in Modesto were not returned. His whereabouts are unknown.

The lawsuit was welcomed by Salvadoran human rights activists, who said they hope it will strike a blow for justice on behalf of death-squad victims.

"When I heard the news, I wanted to cry, I wanted to dance," said Juan Romagoza Arce, a Salvadoran doctor and torture victim who heads the Clinica del Pueblo, a clinic for the poor in the District. "This is good news for many people in Central America and many Salvadoran refugees here in the United States." He said that Romero "represents the 75,000 people killed in El Salvador in the 1980s" and that now "his death will be investigated for the first time."

Romagoza was one of three torture victims who were awarded \$54.6 million in a lawsuit filed against two former Salvadoran generals in federal court in Florida last year.

The lawsuit against Saravia was "long overdue," said Robert E. White, who was the U.S. ambassador to El Salvador when Romero was assassinated and now runs the Center for International Policy, a think tank in the District.

If Romero's case is not pursued, said Maria Julia Hernandez, a leading human rights activist in El Salvador, "we are creating impunity, and our society should not be built on impunity. It should be built on justice."

The complaint against Saravia alleges that he obtained weapons, vehicles and other equipment for the assassination, provided his personal driver to transport the assassin and paid him after the killing. Romero, an outspoken critic of the death squads, was killed with a sniper shot through the heart as he was saying Mass on March 24, 1980.

The lawsuit, based on the 1789 Alien Tort Claims Act and the 1991 Torture Victim Protection Act, was filed on behalf of a Romero relative who lives in the United States. The Center for Justice and Accountability said it is withholding the plaintiff's name for security reasons.

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