

CBS 60 MINUTES

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BILL FORD/IN SEARCH OF JUSTICE

BRADLEY: It's been 3 years since four American missionaries, all women, were brutally murdered in El Salvador, and we still do not know really why it happened. What motivated five Salvadoran soldiers, all of low rank in that country's national guard, to kill them? 'In Search of Justice' is the story of one man who has made it a point to find out why. He has mounted his own investigation, even a crusade, to find out the answers to the killings. Bill Ford is a Wall Street lawyer who in the name of the families of the murdered women has literally put the country of El Salvador on trial as well as his own country's support for that nation. Ford has taken his crusade to audiences around the country and in Washington to the Congress of the United States.

BILL FORD: The case in Salvador is going over a cliff. The State Department is wringing its hands. The FBI has information which is supposedly provative of the matter. The Salvadorians are incompetent, disinterested, intimidated or some combination of all three, and...

BRADLEY: Why did Bill Ford go on this crusade? His sister \*Eda Ford was one of the four missionaries. FORD: I want to know what happened to my sister. I want to know why it happened. I want to know who paid for it, who was present, who directed it. I don't think those questions are unreasonable. I want the answers.

BRADLEY: What happened to Bill Ford's sister is the easiest of those questions to answer. Over the last five years it's estimated that 40,000 people in El Salvador have been murdered. Sister Eda Ford, a Maryknoll nun, was one of them. She was killed along with Jean Donovan, Sister Dorothy \*Caisel and Sister \*Mora Clark on the 2nd of December, 1980. They had been dead for two days when their bodies were uncovered. Some of them had been raped. All had been shot in the head at close range, execution style. Five low-ranking soldiers are charged with the crime, but Ford believes there's more to it than that. FORD: I believe that our government has information that present officials of the government of El Salvador, including Vides Casanova, the present defense minister, either knew about the murders before they happened, or certainly knew about the murders shortly after they happened and covered them up.

BRADLEY: Bill Ford has never bought the official claim made by both governments that the five soldiers acted randomly or without orders from higher ups to kill the missionaries. So he has taken time from his law practice to travel to El Salvador to find out for himself what happened, and with other family members he has repeatedly gone to Washington to complain about how the governments have handled the investigations, and in trips around this country he has told audiences, this one in Peoria, about how the U.S. government has handled the families. FORD: One of the agencies that the families wrote to for information was the CIA. We got a very interesting, very sympathetic letter back. The CIA wanted proof that the women were dead and they wanted proof that I was related to Eda Ward. Upon the furnishing of such proof, and they particularly wanted Eda's death certificate, they would then look through

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their files. I explained to them that you didn't get a death certificate when your sister got murdered in El Salvador.

BRADLEY: Back in his Wall Street office, Bill Ford has been working with a group called the Lawyer's Committee for International Human Rights, piecing together enough bits of information to build a case which differs from the official one. We went with him to El Salvador where he points, for example, to events which took place at San Salvador's airport on the day of the killings. FORD: Eda Ford and Mora Clark were out of the country.

BRADLEY: Jean Donovan and Dorothy Caisel had come to the airport to pick them up. Ford says the Salvadoran government has information that a national guardsmen watched them in the airport and radioed a report of their moves to one of the five soldiers assigned to checkpoint duty around the airport. When Ford wanted to know why no one has been able to ask the guardsmen who made the call why he watched the women and if he had been ordered to watch them, Ford was told that the guardsman had been missing for more than a year. So Bill Ford is left with only the barest details. FORD: The four women got into a Toyota micro-bus that was owned by the Cleveland mission team. They set out from the airport and that was the last time they were seen alive.

BRADLEY: But he still has those questions and he wants to know, too, why the soldiers at the checkpoint changed from their uniforms to civilian clothes, and there's more. Just before the American church women were stopped at a checkpoint about dusk along this road they were preceded by a group of Canadian missionaries. Their vehicle was also stopped, thoroughly searched, and their I.D.s were checked, but then they were permitted to continue on their journey. Not too much later the American missionaries who had been watched at the airport were also stopped at that checkpoint and they were taken off to their deaths. JOSE NAPOLEON DUARTE: Personally I made the investigation on this case and I became absolutely convinced that there was no higher up involved in the case.

BRADLEY: Among those who have repeatedly told Bill Ford that there is no need to investigate the murder of his sister further is Jose Napoleon Duarte, who was president of El Salvador in 1980 and was just re-elected. Over the last two years Duarte has written a book about the case. You think, in your opinion, after your investigation that no one was involved beyond those five soldiers? DUARTE: I can tell you honestly that I believe so.

BRADLEY: On their own they decided to leave their posts at the airport, change their clothes and go out and commit a random act of violence? DUARTE: This is a problem of this country at that moment.

BRADLEY: They could leave their posts at the airport? DUARTE: This is not new. This is the way it's been for the last 50 years. The problem is that you just discover it.

BRADLEY: It's been more than three years since the bodies of the four women were found here and during that time the case of the murdered missionaries has become the most investigated homicide in El Salvador's history. In Washington the murders became an issue that just wouldn't go away, surfacing each time the administration went before Congress to seek more aid or to justify its support of the Salvadoran government. So in this country there would be nine

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investigations, four by the U.S. government and five by the Salvadorans. There was even an investigation of the investigations, but one thing neither government has done that Bill Ford and the human rights lawyers have is to look for information here in Chalatenango, a war-torn town in the countryside where his sister Eda and Mora Clark lived and worked and where they are now buried. Just a month before she died Eda Ford, in a tape-recorded interview, talked about the hazards people here faced. EDA FORD: One of the works we're involved in would be the people who are displaced or refugees, those who are fleeing for various reasons. Some are fleeing because of the climate of terror. Some are fleeing because members of their family have been killed and they themselves have been threatened.

BRADLEY: Working with those people was dangerous not only for Bill Ford's sister but for all church workers because in much of Central America they are persecuted. EDA FORD: The colonel of the local regiment said to me the other day that the church is indirectly subversive because it's on the side of the weak.

BRADLEY: In fact, Bill Ford said according to a priest in Chalatenango, on the very day the women were murdered a soldier had a list of people to be killed and on that list were the names Mora Clark and Eda Ford. The soldier said, 'Today's the day when the killing would begin.' Ford and the human rights lawyers made this information available to the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador. Yet three years after the murders no one with the exception of Ford and the human rights lawyers, have come to Chalatenango to investigate the significance of the death list. We wanted to ask the State Department about that but ran into a number of obstacles. First of all, the State Department turned down our request for an interview in Washington with one of their officers familiar with the case and then here in San Salvador after we had arranged an interview with the American ambassador it was canceled on orders from Washington. Do you ever get the feeling that you're tilting against windmills down here? FORD: Well, I think the biggest windmill we're tilting against is probably in Washington rather than El Salvador, but obviously some days you wonder whether you're doing any good or whether you're just perceived as a crank, but the alternative is unacceptable. The alternative is to do nothing and just sit in the corner and mourn, and I'm not prepared to do nothing.

BRADLEY: Bill Ford started his quest in 1980 when he and the other families met at this memorial service in New York and later decided they would find out just what happened in El Salvador. It was 12 days after the murders but already the trail there had become muddled. According to a classified State Department report the first reaction of the Salvadoran authorities was tragically to conceal the perpetrators from justice. The report pointed out that one of the five soldiers confessed within days of the murders and the national guard concealed this fact and ordered the transfer of the killers from their airport post and the switching of their weapons to make detection more difficult, and in those first days Vites Casanova, El Salvador's defense minister who at the time was head of the national guard, told U.S. Embassy officers the murders of the nuns could not have been the work of the Salvadoran government. Robert White was then ambassador to El Salvador. He later testified before Congress. ROBERT WHITE: I repeat now what I reported to the Department of State when I was ambassador. There is no serious investigation

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into the deaths of Sister Eda Ford, Sister Mora Clark, Sister Dorothy Caisel and Miss Jean Donovan.

BRADLEY: White said when it became clear that there was no investigation the Carter administration simply cut off aid until an investigation started.

FORD: The State Department has treated this investigation into the death of the women as a political problem not as a homicide investigation. The State Department has been concerned about the timing of reports. They have spread, deliberately I think, accidentally they say, pieces of disinformation about the nuns.

BRADLEY: Ford points to congressional testimony by then-Secretary of State Alexander Haig. ALEXANDER HAIG: I'd like to suggest to you that some of the investigations would lead one to believe that perhaps the vehicle that the nuns were riding in may have tried to run a roadblock or may have accidentally been perceived to have been doing so and there had been an exchange of fire, then perhaps those who had inflicted the casualties sought to cover it up. FORD: For the secretary of state of the United States in an effort to save the reputation of his clients in El Salvador, this murderous government which your government and mine props up and certifies, went down and lied about four dead church women.

BRADLEY: Haig was later forced to back off his statement when he was questioned during another congressional hearing. All along it's been Congress which has kept the pressure on this administration to see that justice is done in the deaths of the church women, pressure each time the question of money for the Salvadoran government came before it and each time an aid request surfaced, Bill Ford or one of the other relatives surfaced too. FORD: And we meet here, gentlemen, every six months, and I dare say there'll be another family member invited here in six months and then six months and six months, but...

BRADLEY: And each time there would be charges that the State Department wasn't doing all it could. Finally in May of 1983, two-and-a-half years after the murders, the State Department asked retired federal judge Harold \*Tyler to go to El Salvador and conduct an independent investigation. In his report which is still classified, Judge Tyler concludes that the evidence is overwhelming against the five soldiers and the five soldiers alone. They were not acting on orders from higher ups, but Tyler confirms Bill Ford's charges that there was a military coverup of the investigation, a coverup that quite possibly extended to Gen. Vides Casanova, who is now El Salvador's defense minister, and Tyler maintains that the coverup failed only because American investigators uncovered so much evidence that the Salvadorans had no choice but to arrest the five soldiers. Nevertheless, Judge Tyler noted there is no certainty that the case will be successfully prosecuted because juries have been routinely subject to intimidation and because corruption of both juries and judges is an everyday event in El Salvador. This is the courthouse in the town of Zacatecoluca where any day now it is believed the five national guardsmen will be tried for the murder of the four church women, and it was here that Bill Ford came just a few weeks ago because he had some questions for the judge. FORD: The verdict of the jury will be a verdict based on the evidence or a verdict based on the jury's fear?

BRADLEY: Judge \*Bernado Rada assured Ford and the human rights lawyers with him that he was willing to try this case honestly, even though he was literally

risking his own life. Ford is also concerned by the way the case has been prepared for prosecution. For example, an important piece of evidence is the white Toyota van from which the four women were taken. The FBI dusted the van for fingerprints and they came up with one solid piece of evidence, a thumbprint that belonged to one of the five soldiers from the national guard. This is that van today. The military's kept it sitting outside for most of the last couple of years including a couple of tropical rainy seasons. Now keep in mind that under Salvadoran law the thumbprint taken by the FBI is inadmissible as evidence. To be admitted the Salvadorans would have to come back and take the same thumbprint and any chance that they'd find a thumbprint here has been washed away by time and the weather. Still, there will be a trial here and when it is over Bill Ford says the Reagan administration hopes the story will be over, that it will then be able to go to Congress and get what it wants for El Salvador, but for Bill Ford it is far from over. Have you seen anything on this trip that indicates that they're willing to go beyond the trial of the five soldiers, that they're willing to get involved in the coverup to see if there were any higher ups involved? FORD: I've seen nothing so far on this trip to make me believe that the people in El Salvador or the United States' Embassy are interested in seeing it go beyond this trial, but that doesn't mean that the families are not going to keep pushing.

BRADLEY: Because in Bill Ford's mind there are still those questions. FORD: I want to know what happened to my sister. I want to know why it happened. I want to know who paid for it, who was present, who directed it. I don't think those questions are unreasonable. I want the answers.