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Trial of journalists offers intrigue and a cast of hundreds

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SAN JOSE, Costa Rica — A libel trial opened here yesterday featuring soldiers of fortune, CIA "dirty tricksters," Latin revolutionaries, secret tape recordings, kidnappings, drug trafficking and an attempt to assassinate Nicaraguan rebel leader Eden Pastora.

The case pits John Hull, a former U.S. citizen who is now a naturalized Costa Rican, against two American journalists, Martha Honey and Tony Avirgan, a husband and wife team.

Mr. Hull, a rancher who owns or "manages" land near the Nicaraguan border, is suing the couple for nearly \$20 million, charging that they libeled him by linking him with a bombing nearly two years ago at La Penca, Mr. Pastora's Nicaraguan jungle camp near the Costa Rican border.

Three journalists were killed and several people were injured in that bombing, including Mr. Pastora and Mr. Avirgan.

The journalist couple has lived here for the past three years, according to an interview with Miss Honey, and they report on Central America for American, Canadian and British television networks and newspapers, including the Times of London.

Mr. Hull's attorney, Alberto Rodriguez, said that Mr. Hull denies all charges made by the journalists and that their report contains numerous anonymous sources, pseudonyms and statements of third parties unsupported by any acceptable evidence.

According to the Tico Times, Mr. Hull has long expressed sympathy for the Nicaraguan rebels and his activities in northern Costa Rica have been the subject of numerous local investigations in recent years. However, the Tico Times added, Mr. Hull has strongly denied any connection to the La Penca bombing.

In an 84-page report by the journalist couple which was obtained by The Washington Times, Mr. Hull is mentioned more than a dozen times in connection with alleged CIA activities, drug trafficking and a bombing plot against Mr. Pastora.

The report, called "La Penca: Pastora, the Press and the CIA," was funded in part by the U.S. Committee to Protect Journalists and the American Newspaper Guild, according to the Tico Times. The underwriters are not named on the report, but Miss Honey said it was also funded by the World Press Freedom Association.

The perpetrator of the unsolved La Penca bombing posed as a Scandinavian photojournalist, but Mr. Avirgan and Miss Honey contend he was a Libyan "whose comrades knew him as Amac Galil."

They state in their report that Mr. Galil was recruited in Chile for the La Penca operation in early 1984 by the CIA, members of two Contra groups — including the largest one, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force — and anti-Castro Cuban-Americans in Miami.

They further allege that Costa Rican officials participated in a cover-up of the bombing plot, which they say was styled to look like a Sandinista attack on Mr. Pastora.

Contra leaders began to suspect Mr. Pastora was a communist and plotted against him, Miss Honey said in an interview. The CIA assisted in the plot, upset that Mr. Pastora steadfastly refused to unite with the other Contra groups operating in the north of Nicaragua, she added.

Early press reports on La Penca pointed a finger at ETA, a Basque separatist organization that reportedly had close ties to the Sandinistas. But Miss Honey and Mr. Avirgan contend that intelligence sources in Washington planted those stories in the major U.S. media.

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