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February 19, 1986

In response, please refer to #86-0546

CONGRESSIONAL AFFAIRS
86-0603

Mr. Dave Gries
Director
Office of Congressional Affairs
Central Intelligence Agency
Washington, D.C. 20505

Dear Dave:

A former Salvadoran army officer who reportedly served under the G-5 in the General Staff, Lt. Ricardo Ernesto Castro, has told news reporters that he commanded death squad operations and at one point served as a translator for a CIA trainer who, during a course on interrogation techniques, discussed the effective administration of electro-shock techniques. Some of these allegations are contained in the attached Associated Press story; others were described to a member of our staff by a reporter.

The Committee examined in 1984 the question of political violence in El Salvador, but this matter did not come to our attention. We would appreciate your finding out what truth there may be to Mr. Castro's charges and letting us know.

Sincerely,

Bernard F. McMahon
Staff Director

Attachment

Former Salvadoran officer admits death-squad killings

Associated Press

Washington, D.C.

A former Salvadoran army officer, planning to seek political asylum in the United States, says he participated in death-squad killings in the early 1980s and witnessed the slaughter of civilians by El Salvador's U.S.-backed military.

Former Lt. Ricardo Ernesto Castro, 35, a 1973 West Point graduate, described death-squad killings of suspected subversives as a routine activity of the Salvadoran Army in early 1981. He said he commanded four assassination missions, claiming about a dozen lives.

Castro said he also saw the army execute women and children during a counterinsurgency sweep near the Lempa River in the fall of 1981 and leave the bodies in shallow streams as a warning to leftist guerrillas.

"My company was thirsty, but the soldiers would not take water from one of these streams because of these kids' corpses," Castro said recently.

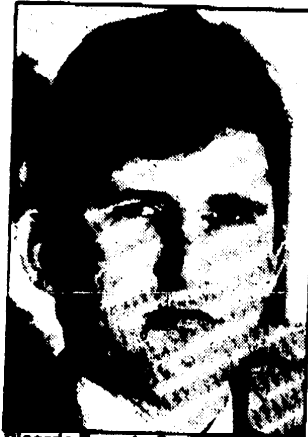
Castro, who left El Salvador in mid-1982, is the first Salvadoran army officer to publicly state that he participated in death-squad killings.

Castro said he was recruited to work with the CIA and served as a translator for an American who trained the Salvadoran military on interrogation techniques. He said the U.S. trainer did not advocate torture, but suggested that suspects be kept "completely disoriented" by keeping them isolated and employing psychological tactics.

Castro's statements support allegations made by private human rights groups that the Salvadoran military committed massive abuses in the early 1980s, killing tens of thousands of civilians. During those years, the Reagan administration disputed many of the charges but acknowledged that some abuses occurred.

The administration now contends abuses have largely been brought under control, although private human rights groups say government forces still commit selective murders in the cities and use indiscriminate firepower in the countryside.

An estimated 50,000 civilians have died in the 6-year-old civil war.



Ricardo Ernesto Castro

Castro said he came to the United States in mid-1982 to tell U.S. officials about the corruption and atrocities that many young officers felt were undermining prospects for restoring peace in El Salvador. After his appeals received little attention, he said he decided to stay in Washington with his wife and three children and plans to request asylum.

"All the killings I know of were done by the armed forces," Castro said. "It was one of these deals when you come back from a mission, the colonel calls you over and says, 'Lieutenant, you're going out on a mission.

You're going to get dressed up as a civilian and you're going to go out and this individual will show you the way."

"He knows who you have to eliminate. He might give you a small list. You go out like you were a subversive. You leave the trucks far away, take the weapons a subversive would take, pretty much try to pass off as a subversive."

Castro said an informer — known as a "chanique" — would direct the soldiers to a house and identify the target. "We'd kill him right on the spot," the former lieutenant said.

Mass killings also occurred in military sweeps through guerrilla-dominated areas, he said. Castro said he witnessed the slaughter of unarmed civilians during the U.S.-trained Atlacatl battalion's march to the Lempa River on the Honduran border in November 1981.

"The first day ... we encountered an awful lot of resistance, but after the first day you practically got nothing. ... What really made me (and) a lot of soldiers sick ... occurred then" when the army cornered civilians near the river.

"Twenty-two or 24 were killed ... in front of my troops. I didn't like it one bit, little girls yelling, 'Mama, mama,' someone being killed in cold blood."

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