

EL SALVADOR:

Investigation of Jesuit Murders Stalled

Slow progress in investigating the murder of six Jesuit priests last November and new allegations of broader military involvement have renewed doubts about the Salvadoran Government's commitment to resolving the case.

The investigation appears to be at a standstill. [REDACTED] that Judge Zamora, who is heading the investigation, has not aggressively solicited information to build a stronger case against Col. Guillermo Benavides, who is accused of ordering the murders, and eight other suspects. Zamora has not interviewed senior officers who attended a commanders' meeting the night of the killings and only recently sought testimony from members of the military Honor Commission formed in January to conduct an internal armed forces investigation. The commission claims it did not keep records and did not issue a written report, [REDACTED]

Army Col. (ret.) Sigifredo Ochoa alleged on a US news program last month that Vice Minister of Defense Zepeda and other senior officers may have participated in the decision to kill the Jesuits. Although the [REDACTED] that Zepeda has no control over tactical units and was not in the chain of command the night of the murders, rumors of his involvement persist. Zepeda has offered to testify before the judge, but Zamora has not yet interviewed him. [REDACTED]

Judicial authorities announced Monday that a notebook allegedly kept by Benavides and requested as evidence by the judge has disappeared. Four potential military witnesses [REDACTED] were sent abroad for training and will not be available to testify until later this month. [REDACTED]

Comment: Growing criticism of the government's investigation and a recent move in the US Congress to cut military aid to El Salvador may prompt President Cristiani to press the judicial authorities to expand the investigation; he may also ask foreign experts, such as the FBI, for help—as he did early in the inquiry. Nonetheless, the apparent reluctance of the judge to follow up potential leads, legal constraints on the use of evidence—codefendants cannot testify against each other—and the grudging cooperation of the most senior officers probably will cause further delays in bringing the case to trial.

[REDACTED]

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NOV 1993