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Salvadoran colonel implicated in Jesuit killings pleads not guilty to fraud, perjury

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This 2009 file photo show a stone bearing the names of six Jesuits massacred in 1989 at Central American University in San Salvador, El Salvador. (CNS photo/Luis Galdamez, Reuters)

A notorious graduate of the U.S. Army's School of the Americas -- a Salvadoran colonel implicated in the 1989 assassinations of six Jesuit priests -- is fighting criminal charges for allegedly lying on immigration papers that have allowed him to live quietly in the United States for the last 10 years.

Former Col. Inocente Orlando Montano Morales pleaded not guilty Thursday to charges of fraud and perjury in U.S. District Court in Boston.

The 69-year-old former vice minister for public security, who had been working in a candy factory in Massachusetts, faces up to 40 years in prison.

Federal prosecutors say he lied under oath and gave false statements in 2002 when he applied for temporary protected status, a status given to those who fear for their lives if returned to their native country. Montano stated that he had never served in the military or received weapons training.

Since his arrest in August, Montano has acknowledged he had been in the Salvadoran armed forces, but insists he played no role in the Jesuit killings at San Salvador's Central American University.

However, the 1993 U.N. Truth Commission report tells a different story.

On the night before the massacre, the report says Colonel René Emilio Ponce discussed the plot against the Jesuits in the presence of Montano and other officers. Ponce and Montano were old friends, both 1970 graduates of the School of the Americas, a facility of the U.S. Army at Fort Benning, Ga., which trains Latin American soldiers.

At the meeting, Ponce gave "the order to kill Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría and to leave no witnesses," the U.N. report says. Ellacuría, the rector of the university, and his fellow Jesuits were among the most respected intellectuals in the country and among the strongest voices for a negotiated peace to their country's civil war.

Just hours after the meeting, in the early morning of Nov. 16, 1989, an elite "anti-terrorist" unit of the Salvadoran army stormed the university, dragging Ellacuría and the other Jesuits from their beds and blowing out the backs of their heads with high-powered assault rifles. To eliminate witnesses, the soldiers then executed the priests' cook and her teenage daughter, riddling them with bullets as they clung to each other.

The U.N. report also states Montano was among the officers who participated in a cover-up, who "pressured lower-ranking officers not to mention orders from above in their testimony to the court."

His role in the Jesuit massacre might not have been the sole reason Montano did not want to admit on immigration papers he was part of the Salvadoran military.

Montano was one of 15 members of the Salvadoran High Command whose human rights abuses were documented in a U.S. Senate report titled, "Barriers to Reform: A Profile of El Salvador's Military Leaders." The May 21, 1990, report, prepared by the staff of the U.S. Senate's Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus, links Montano to the Jesuit case and other atrocities.

The report notes, for example, that five months prior to the Jesuits' murders, he "publicly accused the university of being a 'front group' that published 'lies' to discredit the Army."

It goes on to document human rights abuses committed by troops under his command.

In August 1986, when Montano was commander of the Engineering Brigade, soldiers in the brigade kidnapped three brothers in San Pedro Nonualco. "The next day," the report says, "their bodies were reportedly found in the street with their throats cut and one's tongue cut out."

In July 1987, when Montano was commander of the 6th Brigade, soldiers from the brigade reportedly threw a grenade into a house in Jiquilisco, killing one and wounding eight others inside, including six children. The same month, soldiers under his command threatened a man who refused to sell them bread and five days later "riddled him with bullets in his hammock, while simulating a firefight outside his house," the report said.

In January 1989, soldiers under his command seized two members of an agricultural cooperative in San Francisco Javier. "The two men's bodies were found three days later with arms and ears cut off," the report said, adding that the Armed Forces claimed the two men were rebels who had been killed in a firefight with the Army.

Fr. Roy Bourgeois, the founder of SOA Watch, which monitors graduates of the school, now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, is angered that Montano "has been living the good life in the United States."

It strains credibility, he said, that the U.S. government was ignorant of Montano's presence and background, particularly since he did not use a false name.

Montano was tracked down by The Center for Justice & Accountability, a San Francisco-based human rights organization that filed a lawsuit in Madrid that led to indictments in May of Montano and 19 others in connection with the Jesuit case.

Montano's case, Bourgeois said, "is not an aberration," citing two Salvadoran generals whom the U.S. allowed to enter the country in the 1990s. José Guillermo García, a former defense minister, and Carlos Vides Casanova, a former head of the National Guard, were both implicated by the U.N. Truth Commission for their roles in the 1980 murders of four U.S. churchwomen. Garcia was an SOA graduate, while Casanova was a guest speaker at

the school.

"All these guys have worked closely with the U.S. military and the CIA and have contacts here" who help them out, Bourgeois said.

"It reminds me of how the U.S. helped smuggle Nazis into South America," he said. Bourgeois got a glimpse of that operation in Bolivia, where he served as a Maryknoll missionary from 1972-77. During that time, the Gestapo Chief Klaus Barbie, known as the Butcher of Lyon, roamed the streets freely. The country was then ruled by General Hugo Banzer, an SOA graduate who had overthrown the government but was nevertheless approved by the State Department to be honored in SOA's Hall of Fame.

What particularly angers Bourgeois is that Montano got protected status while so many poor Salvadorans who came to the U.S. fleeing the military's violence were sent back to face their fate.

The latest development, he said, "makes me wonder how many more war criminals are living here that we don't know about."

[Linda Cooper and James Hodge are the authors of *Disturbing the Peace: The Story of Father Roy Bourgeois and the Movement to Close the School of the Americas*.]

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