NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Salvadoran tied to Jesuit slayings pleads guilty to immigration charges

Edgardo Ayala Catholic News Service | Sep. 12, 2012

SAN SAVADOR -- News that a former Salvadoran army official accused in the 1989 slayings of six Jesuits priests pleaded guilty to charges that he lied to U.S. immigration officials and now faces deportation to Spain to face prosecution in the deaths was welcomed by the former rector of the university where the clergymen taught.

Inocente Orlando Montano, a retired army colonel who has lived near Boston since 2001, pleaded guilty in federal court to three counts of immigration fraud and three counts of perjury under a deal with federal prosecutors Sept. 11.

Montano was among 20 Salvadorans indicted in Spain in 2011 in connection with the killings of the priests, their housekeeper and her daughter. He has denied any involvement in the deaths.

Father Jose Maria Tojeira, former rector at the University of Central America in San Salvador, where the priests taught and lived, said the news of the possible deportation and likely prosecution was long overdue.

"Everything that promotes justice is good. However, our maximum interest is to promote justice in El Salvador, so that the country cannot be seen as a place where impunity prevails," Father Tojeira told Catholic News Service.

"We will continue to seek justice here," he said.

The murders took place in a small compound on the university's campus during one of the fiercest military offensives in the country's 12-year civil war, which ended in 1992.

The retired colonel admitted lying to U.S. officials by saying he was never part of the Salvadoran army and that he never used weapons against other people so that he could be granted temporary protection status. Under such status, Montano could have eventually returned safely to El Salvador.

But records showed that Montano was vice minister of defense for public security at the time of the murders and belonged to a group of military officers known as La Tandona, who controlled the army during the civil war that left an estimated 70,000 dead. The war ended with the Peace Accords in 1992.

That group of officers has been linked to serious war crimes committed during the conflict, according to several reports, including findings by the United Nations Truth Commission in 1993.

By pleading guilty to the U.S. charges, Montano, 70, faces a sentence of up to 45 years in prison. A sentencing hearing was set for Dec. 18.

But the retired officer can be deported to Spain, because he is one of 20 Salvadoran officers required in 2011 by a Spanish court accused of participating in the murders.

A Spanish judge sent a request to the U.S. government for Montano to be extradited to Spain. A U.S. response is

pending.

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