

Death Squads in El Salvador:

A Pattern of U.S. Complicity

by David Kirsh*

In 1963, the U.S. government sent 10 Special Forces personnel to El Salvador to help General José Alberto Medrano set up the Organización Democrática Nacionalista (ORDEN)—the first paramilitary death squad in that country. These Green Berets assisted in the organization and indoctrination of rural “civic” squads which gathered intelligence and carried out political assassinations in coordination with the Salvadoran military.¹

Now, there is compelling evidence to show that for over 30 years, members of the U.S. military and the CIA have helped organize, train, and fund death squad activity in El Salvador.

In the last eight years, six Salvadoran military deserters have publicly acknowledged their participation in the death squads. Their stories are notable because they not only confirm suspicions that the death squads are made up of members of the Salvadoran military, but also because each one implicates U.S. personnel in death squad activity.

The term “death squad” while appropriately vivid, can be misleading because it obscures their fundamental identity. Evidence shows that “death squads” are primarily military or paramilitary units carrying out political assassinations and intimidation as part of the Salvadoran government’s counterinsurgency strategy. Civilian death squads do exist but have often been comprised of off-duty soldiers financed by wealthy Salvadoran businessmen.

It is important to point out that the use of death squads has been a strategy of U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine. For example, the CIA’s “Phoenix Program” was responsible for the “neutralization” of over 40,000 Vietnamese suspected of working with the National Liberation Front.²

Part of the U.S. counterinsurgency program was run from the Office of Public Safety (OPS). OPS was part of U.S. AID, and worked with the Defense Department and the CIA to modernize and centralize the repressive capabilities of client state police forces, including those in El Salvador.³ In 1974 Congress ordered the discontinuation of OPS.

In spite of the official suspension of police assistance between 1974 and 1985, CIA and other U.S. officials worked with Salvadoran security forces throughout the restricted period to

centralize and modernize surveillance, to continue training, and to fund key players in the death squad network.⁴

Even though the U.S. government’s police training program had been thoroughly discredited, the Reagan administration found other channels through which to reinstate police assistance for El Salvador and Honduras. Attached to this assistance is the requirement that the president certify that aid recipients do not engage in torture, political persecution, or assassination. Even so, certain members of Congress showed concern over the reinstatement of police aid to repressive regimes. In a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, Senator Claiborne Pell (Dem.-Rhode Island) asked, “I was talking about cattle prods specifically. Would they be included or not?”

Undersecretary of State for Latin American Affairs Elliott Abrams replied, “Well, I would say that in my view if the police of Costa Rica, with their democratic tradition, say that for crowd control purposes they would like to have 50 shot [sic] batons, as they are called in a nonagricultural context, I would personally want to give it to them. I think that government has earned enough trust, as I think we have earned enough trust, not to be questioned, frankly, about exporting torture equipment. But I would certainly be in favor of giving it to them if they want it.”⁵

Death Squad Members, Testimony

César Vielman Joya Martínez, a soldier in the First Infantry Brigade’s Department 2 (Intelligence), is the most recent Salvadoran to admit his involvement in death squad activity. At a November 1, 1989 press conference Joya Martínez stated that certain military units in Department 2 carried out “heavy interrogation” (a euphemism for torture) after which the victims were killed. The job of his unit was to execute people by strangulation, slitting their throats, or injecting them with poison. He admitted killing eight people and participating in many more executions. He stated that the Brigade Commander had sent written orders to carry out the killings and that the use of bullets was forbidden because they might be traced to the military.⁶

Joya Martínez also claims that one of the U.S. advisers working with the First Brigade sat at a desk next to his and received “all the reports from our agents on clandestine captures, interrogations...but we did not provide them with

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1. Allan Naim, “Behind the Death Squads,” *The Progressive*, May 1984. Reprints are still available from *The Progressive*.

2. Michael McClintock, *The American Connection*, Vol. I (London: Zed Press, 1985).

3. The “Interdepartmental Technical Subcommittee on Police Advisory Assistance Programs,” U.S. State Department, June 11, 1962, cited in *The American Connection*, Vol. I, *op. cit.*, n. 1. “In general [the] CIA endeavors to develop the investigative techniques, and AID (Agency for International Development) [develops] the capabilities of the police to deal with the military aspects of subversion and insurgency.”

4. *Op. cit.*, n. 1

5. “The Central American Counterterrorism Act of 1985,” hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, November 5 and 19, 1985, p. 19.

6. “Army Deserters’ Testimony Reveals U.S. Role,” *Alert!*, November 1989, p. 6; David Bates, “Blood Money: assassin says he slit throats while U.S. wrote checks,” *In These Times*, November 15-21, 1989.

reports on the executions. They did not want to hear of the actual killings." U.S. advisers authorized expenses for such extras as black glass on squad vans to allow executions to take place unobserved; provided \$4,000 for the monthly budget; and conducted classes in recruiting informants and conducting intelligence reconnaissance.⁷

Another Salvadoran soldier, Ricardo Castro, is the first officer to come forward with information about death squad activity. Castro graduated from West Point in 1973 and was a company commander in the Salvadoran Army. He translated



Credit: Barry Thumma, Associated Press

Ricardo Ernesto Castro, former death squad member.

for several U.S. advisers who taught, among other subjects, interrogation techniques. Castro claims that one U.S. instructor worked out of the Sheraton Hotel (taken over briefly during the November 1989 FMLN offensive) and emphasized psychological techniques. Castro recalled a class where Salvadoran soldiers asked the adviser about an impasse in their torture sessions:

He was obviously against torture a lot of the time. He favored selective torture.... When they learned something in class, they might go back to their fort that night and practice.... I remember very distinctly some students talking about the fact that people were conking out on them...as they were administering electric shock. 'We keep giving him the electric shock, and he just doesn't respond. What can we do?'.... The American gave a broad smile and said, 'You've got to surprise him. We know this from experience. Give him a jolt. Do something that will just completely amaze him, and that should bring him out of it.'⁸

7. "Salvadoran Killings Cited-Deserter Links U.S. Advisors to Army Unit," *Washington Post*, October 27, 1989; *op. cit.*, n. 6.

8. Allan Nairn, "Confessions of a Death Squad Officer," *The Progressive*, March 1986; *Associated Press*, February 13, 1986.

Castro revealed that he held monthly briefings with then-deputy CIA chief of station in El Salvador Frederic Brugger who had recruited him for intelligence work after meeting at an interrogation class. Castro also claimed to have knowledge of the perpetration of large massacres of civilians by Army Department 5.

In December 1981, he met in Morazán Province with one of the officers that the U.S. instructor had advised. "They had two towns of about 300 people each, and they were interrogating them to see what they knew. Since I...knew something about interrogations, he said he might want me to help. The Major told me that after the interrogation, they were going to kill them all." Castro was, however, reassigned and did not participate. Later, his pro-government mother told him, "You know, son, these guerrillas, they invent the wildest lies. They say that in December, 600 civilians were killed in Morazán." "Oh, shit, I was hoping I'd been dreaming it," he thought. "I later found out, they did go in and kill them after all."⁹

René Hurtado worked as intelligence agent for the Treasury Police, one of the three Salvadoran paramilitary forces. After a falling out with an officer, he fled to Minnesota, took refuge with a Presbyterian Church congregation, and began describing routine torture methods used by paramilitary forces. These included beatings, electric shock, suffocation, and mutilation. He described techniques such as tearing the skin from "interrogation" subjects, sticking needles into them, or beating them in such a manner that lasting internal injuries but no telltale external marks would be sustained. According to Hurtado, CIA employees and Green Berets taught some of these torture techniques to the Treasury Police in Army staff headquarters.¹⁰

General John Vessey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was particularly disturbed by the implication of the Green Berets and initiated an investigation. The investigator from the Army Criminal Investigation Division stated, "My job was to clear the Army's name and I was going to do whatever [was] necessary to do that." Hurtado refused to cooperate with the investigator on the advice of a member of Congress whom the church parishioners had called upon. When the investigator was told this by the minister, he responded, "Tell Mr. Hurtado that the Congressman has given him very costly advice. When I went to El Salvador to investigate his allegations, at the advice of the U.S. Ambassador, I did not talk to members of the Salvadoran military. If I go again and talk to the military, we don't know who will be hurt, do we?"¹¹

Following revelations of U.S. involvement in death squad activities, the House and Senate Intelligence Committees reported on allegations of U.S. complicity in death squad activity. The Republican-dominated Senate panel confirmed that Salvadoran officials were involved, but denied any direct

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Op. cit.*, n. 1; "Church-protected refugee says he raped, tortured," *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, July 8, 1984. U.S. Special Forces and other military units are well-trained in torture techniques: see Donald Duncan, *The New Legions* (New York: Random House, 1967), pp. 156-161; and "The Navy: Torture Camp," *Newsweek*, March 22, 1976.

11. Allan Nairn, "Assault on Sanctuary," *The Progressive*, August 1985.

U.S. role, keeping certain portions of its report classified.¹² The House Committee stated that, "U.S. intelligence agencies have not conducted any of their activities in such a way as to directly encourage or support death-squad activities." Rep. James Shannon (Dem.-Mass.), who requested the inquiry, commented that the report was "certainly not as conclusive as the committee makes it sound."¹³

Varelli, Carranza, Montano, and others

Frank Varelli is the son of a former Salvadoran Minister of Defense and National Police commander. When Varelli's family came to the U.S. in 1980, Varelli started working as an FBI informant. Years later, he publicly revealed his role in FBI covert operations against domestic organizations opposing Reagan's Central American policy. He has also asserted that the Salvadoran National Guard gave him death lists which he compared to lists of Salvadorans in the U.S. awaiting deportation back to El Salvador. Varelli believes some may have been killed on their return to El Salvador. He reported these contacts with the National Guard to the FBI.¹⁴

Former Colonel Roberto Santivanez claimed that the then-chief of the Salvadoran Treasury Police, Nicolas Carranza, was the officer most active with the death squads.¹⁵ Colonel Carranza is also alleged to have received \$90,000 annually from the CIA.¹⁶ Carranza has confirmed the close working relationship of the paramilitary forces with U.S. intelligence. "[They] have collaborated with us in a certain technical manner, providing us with advice. They receive information from everywhere in the world, and they have sophisticated equipment that enables them to better inform or at least confirm the information we have. It's very helpful."¹⁷

Carlos Antonio Gómez Montano was a paratrooper stationed at Ilopango Air Force Base. He claimed to have seen eight Green Beret advisers watching two "torture classes" during which a 17-year-old boy and a 13-year-old girl were tortured. Montano claimed that his unit and the Green Berets were joined by Salvadoran Air Force Commander Rafael Bustillo and other Salvadoran officers during these two sessions in January 1981. A Salvadoran officer told the assembled soldiers, "[watching] will make you feel more like a man."¹⁸

12. "Officials in El Salvador Linked to Death Squads," *Associated Press*, October 12, 1984.

13. Robert Parry, "Panel reports CIA did not support death squads," *Associated Press*, January 14, 1985.

14. Carlos Norman, "Frank Varelli & the FBI's Infiltration of CISPES," *Our Right to Know* (publication of the Fund for Open Information and Accountability), Spring/Summer 1987; *Los Angeles Times*, February 21, 1987.

15. Dennis Volman, "Salvador death squads, a CIA connection?" *Christian Science Monitor*, May 8, 1984. Santivanez was cited as the (at the time) anonymous military source for the article.

16. *New York Times*, March 22, 1984. Colonel Carranza's CIA salary was confirmed by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

17. *Op. cit.*, n. 1.

18. Raymond Bonner, "U.S. Advisers Saw 'Torture Class,' Salvadoran Says," *New York Times*, January 11, 1982.

Montano claims to have seen eight Green Beret advisers watching two "torture classes."

Above are the accounts of the death squad deserters. Non-military sources have also reported the participation of U.S. personnel. For example, another (highly-placed anonymous civilian) source maintained that Armed Forces General Staff Departments 2 and 5 (organized with help from U.S. Army Colonel David Rodríguez, a

Cuban-American) used tortures such as beating, burning and electric shock.¹⁹ U.S. involvement has also been asserted in sworn accounts by some victims of torture. José Rubén Carrillo Cubas, a student, gave testimony that during his detention by the Long Distance Reconnaissance Patrol (PRAL) in 1986, a U.S. Army Major tortured him by applying electric shocks to his back and ears.²⁰

Various sources have reported the use of U.S.-manufactured torture equipment. René Hurtado, for example, explained, "There are some very sophisticated methods...of torture.....[like the machine] that looks like a radio, like a transformer; it's about 15 centimeters across, with connecting wires. It says General Electric on it..."²¹

Many other documented accounts of brutality by U.S.-trained and advised military units exist. Indeed, the elite Atlacatl Battalion has been implicated in several massacres over the past ten years²² and members of the battalion have been indicted for the November slayings of the six Jesuit priests and two women.

It is widely accepted, in the mainstream media and among human rights organizations, that the Salvadoran government is responsible for most of the 70,000 deaths which are the result of ten years of civil war.²³ The debate, however, has dwelled on whether the death squads are strictly renegade military factions or a part of the larger apparatus. The evidence indicates that the death squads are simply components of the Salvadoran military. And that their activities are not only common knowledge to U.S. agencies,²⁴ but that U.S. personnel have been integral in organizing these units and continue to support their daily functioning. ●

19. *Christian Science Monitor*, *op. cit.*, n. 15.

20. "Torture in El Salvador," CDHES (the Commission for Human Rights in El Salvador), September 1986. The PRAL has received assistance from CIA officer Felix Rodríguez, good friend of George Bush and Donald Gregg, *Z Magazine*, December 1989, p. 57.

21. *Op. cit.*, n. 1; also see Michael Klare and Cynthia Armon, *Supplying Repression* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies, 1981), p. 6, about the U.S. supplying torture equipment.

22. "The Central American Counterterrorism Act of 1985," House of Representatives, hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, October 24 and November 19, 1985, p. 165. This is the same Atlacatl Battalion referred to in 1985, by then-Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Nestor Sanchez as, "The unit that has received the most intensive U.S. training...[and] conducts itself with the populace in such a way that it gains their support."

23. Lindsey Gruson, "Salvador Army Is Said to Seize Rebel Positions," *New York Times*, November 16, 1989.

24. House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing, *op. cit.*, n. 22, pp. 66-73; "Exiles Linked to Salvador Death Squads; Ex-Envoy Says Miami-Based Refugees Direct and Finance Groups," *Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 1984; "U.S. on trial- A class-action suit cross-examines the administration's entire policy on El Salvador," *In These Times*, February 18-24, 1987.

Editorial

This issue of *CAIB* is a glimpse at the many faces of the U.S. intelligence apparatus. From the CIA's involvement in a variety of conflicts in SouthEastAsia to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., we examine the breadth of illegal activities which the government attempts to cover up and which the mainstream media is afraid to explore.

Information about CIA operations in Central America continues to surface. The CIA organized and controlled a group of Costa Rican intelligence officers who, for large retainers, spied on their own government. For many years the CIA clouded the fact that Manuel Noriega's relationship with the Medellín Cartel made him a very rich man. However, when Noriega began to tire of toeing the U.S. line, George Bush decided to act. Panama was invaded, thousands of civilians were killed, and Noriega was captured. Now Noriega will stand trial for activities that the U.S. once condoned.

Perhaps even more appalling is the U.S. backing of the Khmer Rouge in their attempt to overthrow the Hun Sen government in Cambodia. Into this devastating conflict the

U.S. government has sent food and covert military aid to support the guerrilla coalition. Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge is by far the strongest military contingent. If victorious, they would be in a position to gain complete power and return war-ravaged Cambodia to the nightmarish rule of the 1970s.

Finally, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. must be reexamined in response to new evidence which reveals that James Earl Ray may have been set up. A self-professed political assassin, Jules Ron Kimble, claims that he was part of a conspiracy to kill King. Kimble says that he helped several members of the CIA plan and carry out King's murder. Additionally, new evidence suggests that there was a CIA "identities" specialist who helped Ray develop his aliases.

These articles, as well as others in this issue, demonstrate how U.S. covert operations repeatedly work in direct contradiction to our society's professed values. If the United States is ever to achieve the openness and democracy that it so loudly touts to the world, it will first have to do away with the destructive operations of the CIA. ●

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