

El Salvador murders

New evidence on missionary deaths suggests official plot

By John Dinges
Pacific News Service

Evidence based on first-hand accounts of the events surrounding the brutal murders last December of four American missionaries in El Salvador indicates that the murders may have been specifically ordered and carried out in a planned operation by El Salvador's U.S.-backed military forces.

The evidence includes an intercepted radio transmission between Salvadoran security forces staking out the San Salvador airport for an unidentified woman who some officials believe was one of the murdered missionaries.

The evidence, based on interviews with Salvadoran and American officials and church workers in El Salvador at the time of the murders, contrasts sharply with the theory of the crime provided by U.S. government officials. That theory holds that the murders were spontaneous acts of violence and that military personnel involved, if any, were enlisted men acting without higher orders.

Maryknoll sisters Ita Ford and Maura Clarke, Urseline sister Dorothy Kazel and lay missionary Jean Donovan disappeared December 2, 1980, after being last seen at El Salvador's international airport. Their burnt-out Toyota van was found along the airport road the next day, and the four women's bodies were exhumed from a deep, unmarked common grave in a remote area on December 4.

The Salvadoran security forces were suspected in the women's deaths after it was learned that soldiers had been stopping cars along the airport road the night of the murders and had been present at the women's burial.

The U.S. government pressed publicly for a full investigation of possible security force involvement, and in April, after a six-month investigation, six security force enlisted men were placed under "provisional arrest" in El Salvador on suspicion of participating in the crime. According to published reports citing U.S. and Salvadoran officials, four of the six men were manning the roadblock in the area where the crime was committed and two men were linked to the crime by fingerprint and ballistics evidence processed by FBI technicians helping in the case. The State Department officially praised the arrests as "progress...showing the determination of the government of El Salvador to act against wanton violence, whatever its source."

Secretary of State Alexander Haig, at a March 24 Congressional hearing, explained the deaths as accidental, over-reaction by nervous soldiers who "misread the mere travelling down the road (of the nuns' van) as an effort to run a roadblock..."

Two months of locating and interviewing persons with direct knowledge of the events surrounding the women's murders, however, this produced evidence of foreknowledge and planning that runs counter to such a theory of the crime.

Perhaps the most suggestive evidence was provided by former U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador, Robert White, who was fired by the

White declined to give further details, but said it is a "legitimate inference" that the message refers to Ita Ford, who he reasoned may have been singled out for execution because of her work distributing food and medicine and protecting refugees in the radicalized Chalatenango province north of San Salvador.

Government could fail

White said the intercepted message is "only one report," but is important as a lead because if more than one military unit was involved in capturing and executing the women, it would indicate a military operation under the control of a superior officer or officers.

White became convinced that the Salvadoran military, despite promises of a full investigation, was stonewalling on the case to protect superior officers. "If all the case involved was...savage enlisted men acting on their own," he said, "there would have been no problem from the beginning (in punishing them). The message we were getting (from the Salvadoran officials) was that this would crack the military wide open, it could even cause the government to fail."

White contends he has reported all he knows in cables to the State Department, and that it is now up to the department to release the information or use it in the investigation.

An FBI official assigned to the investigation, who requested anonymity, said that he has never been informed about the intercepted message by the State Department.

The critical message

The radio message fits in with other events at the airport that day. The Maryknoll order had four sisters assigned to El Salvador, including the two who were killed, Ita Ford and Maura Clarke. All four had gone to a week-long Maryknoll regional meeting held in Managua and were due to arrive back in El Salvador December 2nd. Arrangements had been made that they would be picked up by Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan, who lived in the airport area and had a 12-seater Toyota mini-bus.

Ford and Clarke were unable to get reservations on the TACA flight 318, the first flight into El Salvador. Their two colleagues, Sisters Madeline Dorsey and Theresa Alexander, did get seats on the flight and went ahead, arriving at the Salvadoran airport about 4:45 PM. They were picked up by Donovan and Kazel and driven to the nearby town of La Libertad, where they had left their jeep. Donovan and Kazel then returned to the airport to await the later flight.

Also on the first TACA flight was Sister Marie Rieckelman, a Maryknoll psychiatrist who had attended the Managua meeting and was continuing on the Miami. In an interview in Washington, she said she and nine other in-transit passengers were made to remain on board during the 40-minute layover, and that during the wait three uniformed Salvadoran soldiers boarded the plane to ask about the passengers' destinations -- a highly unusual occurrence even in Latin America countries ruled by military governments.

Rieckelman said she was the only American woman on the plane and that the soldiers scrutinized her

pass their houses on the rough road. They then heard a short burst of machine gun fire, followed by three or four single shots. They saw the van drive back the way it came.

Ford, Clarke, Donovan and Kazel were not missed until the next afternoon when they failed to appear for appointments in San Salvador.

Meanwhile, other related events were occurring the day of the murders three hours to the north in Chalatenango. Maryknollers Ford and Clarke had lived there in a parish house that doubled as a warehouse for the food and medical supplies they distributed to refugees.

Father Efrain Lopez, the parish priest with whom the two nuns worked, had grown up in Chalatenango province and begun organizing peasant cooperatives there in 1964. "The government and the landowners called us communists because we made the people aware of their rights so they couldn't be so easily manipulated," Lopez told this reporter. He witnessed the process by which peasants organized into popular organizations which eventually merged into the guerrilla movement.

When Ita Ford arrived in Chalatenango in April, 1980, and Maura Clarke five months later, many of the villages had been stripped of young people, Father Lopez said. They had either joined the guerrillas, become refugees in order to stay neutral, or been killed by the government-linked death squads seeking potential guerrillas.

"Our guideline was to help whoever was in need, without considering whether they were of the right or the left," said Father Lopez, now in exile in the U.S. But there had been threats. On November 3, a sign appeared on the parish door proclaiming, "Anyone who enters this house will die. We know they are all communists." The message was signed by the Mauricio Borganovo Anti-Communist Brigade, named after the Salvadoran foreign minister assassinated by leftists in 1977.

Several weeks later, another strong indication of military and para-military interest in the religious workers at Chalatenango occurred at the presidential palace in San Salvador. Carlos Paredes, then the deputy minister of planning (now in exile), recalled in a recent interview that during a meeting in the Blue Room at the palace he listened to a half-hour presentation by Salvadoran Defense Minister Guillermo Garcia. The talk, which included the testimony of a weeping 10-year-old boy, was intended to prove that the nuns and priests in Chalatenango were collaborating with the leftist guerrillas and encouraging people to join them.

No evidence has ever been produced that would tend to corroborate these denunciations against the nuns. Informed Salvadoran and U.S. officials interviewed for this report, including the State Department's James Cheek, who handles the case from Washington, and Bishop Arturo Rivera Y Damas, under whose auspices the Chalatenango food distribution and refugee work was organized, said they are satisfied that the murdered women were not political activists.

But, said Cheek, "What we would consider to be legitimate activity, in El Salvador would be perceived as helping the enemy."

War on church

It was only about two weeks after Defense Minister Garcia's denunciation of the nuns at the presidential palace, on the day of the murders, that Father Lopez, the Chalatenango priest, received a threatening letter in the mail. He said the letter made him decide that he and the nuns were in too much danger -- ten priests and the Salvadoran primates, Archbishop Romero, had already been murdered in the mounting rightist hostility against reform-minded clergymen. Late in the day he drove to San Salvador and asked to be relieved of the post and close the refugee center.

That night, Father Lopez said Ricardo (a pseudonym), a member of his parish staff, was approached at a movie house in Chalatenango by an unknown man who showed him a piece of paper and said, "Here is a list of the people we are going to kill -- and today, this very night, we will begin."

On the list, Father Lopez said, were the names of Ita Ford and

Maura Clarke, his own name, that of a priest who worked with him and other parish workers.

That same night, Ford, Clarke, Kazel and Donovan were murdered.

The next day, December 3rd, still unaware that Ford and Clarke had indeed been murdered, Father Lopez went to talk to the Chalatenango garrison commander, Colonel Ricardo Arbaiza. "He harangued me for an hour, accusing me...and the nuns. He said we were inciting the popular movement in places like Los Ranchos (one of the villages where the nuns delivered food), that we had attacked the army (with propaganda)...that they had captured Czech grenades in a raid in the Los Ranchos convent."

"I was very nervous. I thought they could kill me at any moment...I thought if they believed all those things about us, even if they don't act themselves, it was more than sufficient to cause the degenerates they work with to kill us."

That evening, the white Toyota mini-bus was found burned with the license plates removed along the airport road. The next morning a Catholic priest from near Santiago Nonualco called church authorities to report that villagers had seen soldiers burying four women who looked like foreigners.

A group of church workers and U.S. embassy personnel, including Ambassador White, soon arrived at the burial site to exhume the bodies, all of which showed signs of execution-style shootings, and two of which showed evidence of sexual attack. White learned that a passing milkman had discovered the bodies the previous morning, and that a group of National Guard soldiers and civilians had arrived soon after to dig a trench in which to bury them. White reported the names of the five soldiers and three of the civilians to Washington.

Evidence withheld

The April arrests of the Six Salvadoran security force men is still somewhat of a mystery, according to the FBI. The FBI agents, who had been brought into the investigation at Washington's urging, said their work was rapidly circum-



scribed in El Salvador to purely technical analysis of fingerprints and ballistics tests. "There is no way we can say this was a good or bad investigation," said an FBI source assigned to the case.

Two FBI officials said they did not know that evidence led to the arrest of the six men. In fact, the suspects' fingerprints and ballistics information from the men's rifles were not submitted to the FBI for comparison tests until at least a week after public disclosure of the arrests.

Only then was it established that one of the men's fingerprints matched prints found on the burnt Toyota bus and that another man's rifle produced ballistics data matching cartridges found near the burial site.

The men are in informal barracks arrest, according to news accounts from El Salvador, and a Salvadoran judge is examining the evidence to see if they can be changed.

Former Ambassador White contends that Salvadoran authorities knew from a few days after the murders who was manning the airport roadblock and could have arrested the men immediately. He told this reporter he does not doubt that some of the men in custody might have been involved in the murders, but he is convinced that the soldiers will not be punished for fear they will reveal who else was involved.

"I seriously doubt that there are only six guardsmen involved. If there were, there wouldn't have been enough incentive for the cover-up to have taken place. An arrest of six enlisted men to allay public opinion is a very simple thing to accomplish...It has to be followed up by trial and exposure of those involved, either before or after the fact, either in the act or in the misprision."

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Reagan budget dooms progress

By Cleo Franklin

On Friday, June 16, 1981, the Democratic controlled House voted 217 to 211 to cut as much as \$145 billion through fiscal 1984. These cuts will trim scheduled spending in the next fiscal year about \$39.4 billion and will allow the President to reduce or kill more than 200 domestic programs ranging from food stamps to education and health. To assure Northeastern Republican votes, the White House promised more money for conrail, student loans, medicare and mass transit operating subsidies. To win support of Southern Democrats, the White House apparently promised it wouldn't oppose new sugar-price supports. The White House had to give away as much as \$9 billion to gain about \$20 billion in cuts over three years.

In a meeting of the House Budget Committee after the Reagan budget was approved, Chairman James Jones (D-Okl.) protested: "We are here to complete a shameful charade of political process gone mad." Referring to the Reagan budget package, Congressman Jones said, "No one person here knows what is in the massive document before us." The 1½-inch thick Republican bill was full of penciled-in additions and crossed-out deletions, and even included the name and office telephone number of a woman staffer at the Congressional budget office.

JOBS

Both the House and Senate bills wipe out the \$3.8 billion public service jobs program, while cutting back surviving parts of the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA). It is estimated that 300,000 employees nationwide are facing termination under CETA. Urban Mayors and other defenders say CETA has built a bridge for the unemployed between chronic welfare dependency and the world work. But critics note that not all CETA jobs have gone to the poor. Mrs. John Ehrlichman, the wife of Richard Nixon's Domestic Affairs Advisor, was awarded a \$10,000 a year



CETA job with the Seattle Symphony. In the 1960s Black unemployment fell from 10.7 percent to 6.4 percent. In the 1970s it increased from 6.4 percent to 11.3 percent. What is more relative to the white unemployment rate, Black unemployment fell more in the 1960s but rose more in the 1970s. The declining economy has cut Black family income. Nationwide, for example, 43 percent of Black families in 1979 had money incomes under \$10,000.

In a speech to the NAACP National Convention President Reagan projected that nearly three million additional new jobs will be created by 1986. I only have one question; the same question asked by Benjamin Hooks (Executive Director of the NAACP): What do Black people do until 1986?

AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland told the Communications Workers Convention in Boston that "Working people shouldn't be fooled by the fancy mirages projected by right-wing economic fakers." He went on to say that Reagan's economic program raises "social disaster" and budget cutbacks are being made by "deeply antiworker" officials.

HOUSING

During fiscal year 1982, there will be 162,000 subsidized housing units. And program spending projected to be \$500 million during fiscal year 1982.

HEALTH

The House and Senate disagreed on how to reduce medicare costs. The Senate version would allow future payments to rise 9 percent in

fiscal year 1982 over 1981. The House bill rejects a ceiling and recommends temporary cuts on Medicaid expenditures. One recommendation is that more states should consider effective hospital cost control programs. Both bills tighten up medicare regulations and also will trim payments to individuals and hospitals.

NUTRITION

Food stamp spending will be cut \$1.4 billion or 11 percent less than the levels set by the Carter Administration. The 11 percent cut is proposed in the House Bill. The Senate bill will cut \$1.9 billion. It is estimated that one million of the 23 million recipients would lose their food stamps. Both the House and Senate bill will cut about \$1.5 billion, or 35 percent from school lunch and other nutrition programs in fiscal year 1982.

PENSION AND WELFARE

The minimum Social Security benefit of \$122 a month is deleted in both the House and Senate measure. The change will affect approximately 1.8 million people who paid Social Security taxes for only a few years. Benefits for students age 18 to 21 who are dependents of Social Security recipients will be phased out.

About \$1 billion will be cut from a major welfare program, and to families with dependent children. Eligibility requirements and accounting procedures would be tightened and more recipients would be required to offset at least some of their benefits through public service jobs.

"What we would consider legitimate activity, in El Salvador would be perceived as helping the enemy."

Reagan Administration in January after handling the investigation for the first month. In a recent interview, White revealed that several weeks after the murders, a "high ranking Christian Democrat in the Salvadoran government" came to him with a radio transmission intercepted the day of the murders. The transmission had been provided to the government official by a military source opposed to the rampant violence by the security forces. The transmission, said White, was a conversation between two security force units in the area of the international airport several hours before Maryknoll sisters Ford and Clarke are known to have arrived on a flight from Managua, Nicaragua. It contained the sentence, "No, she didn't arrive on that flight; we'll have to wait for the next."

closely and instructed the stewardess to question her twice about where she was going.

Ford and Clarke had meanwhile taken a later flight and arrived in El Salvador about 7 PM, according to airport workers who remember seeing them get into the Toyota bus with the two other women. According to former Ambassador White, the intercepted radio transmission took place in the interval between the arrival of the two flights from Managua.

Travelers from the airport to San Salvador that evening reported their cars were stopped by a military roadblock and searched. At about 10:30 PM, peasants near the village of Santiago Nonualco, about a half-hour's drive from the airport in the opposite direction from San Salvador, saw a white Toyota bus