News

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A nine-year legal battle ended this week when U.S. officials handed over custody of a former Salvadoran army colonel to Spanish authorities who have indicted him for "terrorist" murder in connection with the 1989 Jesuit massacre in El Salvador.

Inocente Orlando Montano – who was El Salvador's Vice Minister of Defense and Public Safety at the time of the assassinations – arrived in Madrid today (Nov. 29) aboard a Delta Airlines flight. Montano, who'd been in command of the National Police, the Treasury Police and the National Guard, is the highest-ranking official to be extradited from the United States in recent history.

On Nov. 30, he will make his first appearance before the Spanish National Court that indicted him in 2009 on murder and terrorism charges in connection with the atrocity. Six Jesuit priests – five of them Spanish nationals, along with their housekeeper and her 15-year-old daughter were slain by U.S.-trained commandoes at the Jesuit's Central American University (UCA).

International lawyer Almudena Bernabeu, part of the human rights team that filed the original criminal complaint in Spain against Montano on behalf of relatives of the victims, said in an email that she will be taking Montano's testimony at the Nov. 30

proceedings, and is "profoundly humbled by the responsibility ahead on behalf of the Salvadoran people."

"This trial," she said, "offers an opportunity for truth and justice, even if taking place in Spain, and is an effective step towards ending impunity in El Salvador."

For more than two decades, El Salvador’s amnesty law and the failure of its courts to prosecute the case has shielded the architects of the crime.

While Spanish National Court Judge Eloy Velasco issued some 20 international arrest warrants and asked Salvadoran authorities to extradite the defendants residing there, the Salvadoran Supreme Court denied the extradition requests.

Montano, however, was living in the United States when the warrants and extradition requests were issued. He had entered the U.S. in 2002, falsely stating on immigration papers that he had never been a member of the Salvadoran military.

After serving time for immigration fraud and perjury, he was then ordered to be extradited to Spain in February 2016 by Federal Magistrate Kimberly Swank whose ruling detailed his role in the massacre. Montano appealed to the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals to no avail, and then to the US Supreme Court, which denied his request for a stay of extradition earlier this month.

"The U.S. Justice and State Departments are to be commended on their relentless dedication in this case," said Professor Carolyn Patty Blum, the board chair for the non-profit Guernica 37 International Justice Chambers which was co-founded by Bernabeu.

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"The shots heard round the world back on November 16, 1989 will now reverberate again - but this time for justice for the victims and for the people of El Salvador," Blum said.

In her landmark ruling, Swank found that Montano oversaw the military-controlled radio station that made threats against the Jesuits, that on the day before the murders, he participated in a meeting of the High Command where the order to kill them was given, that he provided the assassins with the location of the primary

target, Jesuit Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría, the rector of the University of Central America.

At the time, Ellacuría was a key negotiator in peace talks between the U.S.-backed rightwing Salvadoran government and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN).

Earlier this week, Montano's impending extradition to Spain sparked new efforts to pursue the case against those who ordered the crime.

On Nov. 27, UCA authorities asked a Salvadoran court to re-open the cases against those suspected of being behind the massacre - including former President Alfredo Cristiani, a graduate of Georgetown University, who was in office at the time of the assassinations.

Besides Cristiani, the Jesuits named Montano and former Generals Rafael Humberto Larios, Juan Rafael Bustillo, Rene Emilio Ponce, Francisco Elena Fuentes, and Juan Orlando Zepeda. All six officers were graduates of the U.S. Army School of the Americas, now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

[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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