News



A bishop at the Centro Romero in San Salvador on Jan. 18, 2022, looks at a display of clothes the Jesuits and their housekeepers were wearing when they were murdered in 1989. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)



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A judge in El Salvador ruled Nov. 18 that the country's former president, and 10 others, will stand trial for the wartime killing of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her teenage daughter in 1989.

The whereabouts of Alfredo Cristiani, the country's president at the time of the murders, are unknown, and others who also are set to stand trial are missing. A warrant has been issued for Cristiani's arrest as well as others, reported the Salvadoran newspaper El Diario de Hoy. No date for the trial has been set, according to the newspaper.

The ruling came almost 35 years to the date of the killings of Frs. Ignacio Ellacuría, Segundo Montes, Ignacio Martin-Baró, Amando López, Joaquín López y López and Juan Ramón Moreno, along with Elba Julia Ramos and her daughter Celina Ramos. They were fatally shot at the priests' residence Nov. 16, 1989, on the campus of the Jesuit José Simeón Cañas Central American University in San Salvador, known as the UCA.

On the social media platform X, Jesuit Fr. Jose María Tojeira, former rector of the UCA, wrote Nov. 20 that a trial doesn't go far enough.

"The ideal is that the judge makes the military ask for forgiveness for what was an institutional crime," he wrote. "To do it publicly and to promise to take clear measures so that it doesn't happen again. 35 years without the [Armed Forces] taking responsibility for the crime."

> 'I'm still angry. Angry that there has been no true justice for the Jesuit martyrs. Angry that the intellectual authors of these crimes have evaded accountability.'
> —U.S. Rep. Jim McGovern
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The university keeps photo albums of that day so visitors can see in detail the brutality of the killings: brain matter on the lawn and limbs blasted away by high-powered weapons used against the unarmed priests. Ramos was found as if embracing her daughter.

Most of the priests were wearing bathrobes or clothing indicating that they were getting ready for bed when they were ambushed, taken to a garden and shot point-blank, face-down in the head. Their bloodied clothing hangs in the "Hall of Martyrs" at the university, along with clumps of grass stained with their blood spilled that day.

Their deaths took place during the country's civil war, and like many of the more than 75,000 civilians killed during that time, their murders have gone unpunished — until recently.

In 2020, Spain convicted Inocente Montano, a former Salvadoran colonel, for the murder of five of the priests who had Spanish citizenship. He was sentenced to 133 years in prison. Montano also will be tried in the group of 11 in El Salvador.

That country's trial will take place even if those charged are not present, said various news reports. Juan Rafael Bustillo Toledo, Juan Orlando Zepeda Herrera, Rafael Humberto Larios López, Carlos Camilo Hernández, Nelson Iván López Y López and Joaquín Arnoldo Cerna Flores, Cristiani and Montano face charges of murder and acts of terrorism.

Another former politician, Rodolfo Parker, who was a legal adviser to the Salvadoran Armed Forces at the time of the killings, will be tried for fraud and covering up, along with military agents Óscar Alberto León Linares and Manuel Antonio Ermenegildo Rivas Mejía.

Cristiani, a graduate of the Jesuit Georgetown University in Washington, was president of El Salvador 1989-1994. He has long been identified as orchestrating, ordering and then covering up the crime. He is said to have targeted some of the priests because they were critical of his government's violation of human rights during the war, which included torture, rape and killings of unarmed civilians.

Efforts to convict anyone for the Jesuit murders have been elusive in El Salvador. Former San Salvador Archbishop Fernando Sáenz Lacalle, a Spaniard who once was

chaplain of the country's military, fiercely opposed reopening an investigation into the killings and defended Cristiani.

In a Nov. 16 event marking the 35 years since the killings, Jesuit Fr. Mario Cornejo, the university's current rector, said the UCA, too, was a victim. It's important to be transparent about the people and institutions "implicated in this barbarity," he said.

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He said the university has emphasized the need to reach justice not founded on vengeance.

"In fact, the UCA has proposed the commutation of a sentence [in the killings] for humanitarian reasons for those responsible for the massacre," Cornejo said.

Like Cristiani, 76, many of those suspected and accused in the case are in their late 70s or 80s.

U.S. Rep. Jim McGovern of Massachusetts, who knew some of the slain Jesuits, attended the UCA's Nov. 16 event. He credited the priests with helping him regain his Catholic faith after watching their example of speaking up for the poor and being passionate about the Gospel’s social justice values.

"I’m still angry," he said at the event. "Angry that there has been no true justice for the Jesuit martyrs. Angry that the intellectual authors of these crimes have evaded accountability. Many of them still live in this country."

In August 2023, the archbishop of San Salvador announced that a canonization process had started for a group of martyrs killed during the country's civil war and he specifically mentioned Ellacuría. In March, the newspaper El Diario de Hoy, said a monsignor in the archdiocese "anticipated" the other Jesuits and the women who died that day would be included in the cause for canonization.

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