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25 Years Later, a National Trauma Still Haunts Honduras

A quarter century has passed since 1981, but for Hondurans like Bertha Oliva, it could still be yesterday. “Every June 11, I wake up at 3:21 a.m. I’ve tried to forget, but it’s impossible,” she said. On that morning in 1981, her husband, Tomás Nativí, was forcibly abducted from their home by masked men. She never saw him again.

Twenty-five years ago Hondurans began to witness a pattern of forced disappearances, torture and extrajudicial killings in their country. As part of a strategy to stop the perceived tide of leftist revolution from spilling into Honduras, the Honduran military, with support from the United States, initiated a policy to eliminate people suspected of having ties to the insurgency in El Salvador or the Sandinista revolutionary government in Nicaragua or of supporting insurgent activity within Honduras.

Student leaders, trade unionists, clergy and other political and human rights activists were abducted off the street or taken from their homes, often in front of eyewitnesses. The perpetrators were frequently dressed in civilian clothes, thus enabling Honduran security forces to deny involvement. Victims who survived told stories of interrogation and torture, and those whose bodies were found showed signs of brutal abuse; many individuals simply disappeared.

Despite official denials at the time, it is now known that the Honduran military was responsible for these operations, the bulk of which occurred from 1981 to 1984. In addition, official sources reveal that the U.S. government knew that human rights abuses were taking place but failed to take steps to stop them—and through funding and military and intelligence training actually helped foster this climate of abuse.

In 1981 Nativí, a 33-year-old professor, must have been at the top of the Honduran military’s target list. He and his colleague Fidel Martínez, a 40-year-old agronomist, had co-founded the People’s Revolutionary Union, a leftist organization critical of the government and opposed to foreign intervention in the region.

Nativí had been illegally detained and tortured previously and was still under treatment for torture-related injuries on the morning of June 11, when six men wearing ski masks broke into his Tegucigalpa home while he, Oliva—who was pregnant—and Martínez slept. The men shot Martínez, beat Nativí and took the two men away in a car. During the struggle, Oliva pulled the mask off one of the men; she later recognized him as Alexander Herdández Santos, a police captain believed to be the operational commander of Battalion 3-16, a military intelligence unit that functioned as a death squad. Authorities denied involvement in the abductions, and said the men had probably gone to Cuba or Nicaragua.

“After that reaction from the authorities, I began my public fight,” Oliva said. “I felt like an ant before an elephant.” She sought out other women who had lost spouses, siblings or children. There were many.

Among them was the family of Manfredo Velásquez, a 35-year-old graduate student, teacher,



Families of the disappeared demand justice at a 1985 demonstration in La Merced Plaza.

25 Years Later *continued*

“Forced disappearance not only destroys the person but also the family.”

—Bertha Oliva, widow of disappeared activist Tomás Nativi and co-founder of the Committee of Relatives of Detained-Disappeared in Honduras

father and leader of a socialist national student union who had been abducted off a street in downtown Tegucigalpa on Sept. 12, 1981. Eyewitnesses saw him being pushed into a car by six men, allegedly agents of the National Intelligence Directorate (DNI), the intelligence arm of the Honduran public security forces. The family’s efforts to obtain official information on his whereabouts led nowhere.

On Sept. 16 Oliva, the Velásquez family and other people from Velásquez’s hometown, along with members of union organizations, staged a large protest in front of the Honduran National Congress in Tegucigalpa to demand justice from the Honduran authorities. More protests followed, as more people disappeared.

Oliva and the Velásquez family joined with others, such as the families of María Ediltrudis Montes, Julio César Méndez, Enrique López Hernández and Francisco Samuel Pérez. These four friends—all students or activists in their early 20s—were detained and disappeared on Jan. 24, 1982 at a border checkpoint while traveling by bus from Nicaragua into Honduras. Eyewitnesses claimed that armed men identifying themselves as DNI agents boarded the bus and forcibly detained the four. The reason for their detention is unknown, but as students returning from Nicaragua, they may have been suspected of being sympathetic to the revolutionary government there; in addition, López was active in student and labor union movements. Honduran authorities subsequently denied any knowledge of their whereabouts.

Other families who joined in protesting the disappearance of their loved ones were those of Eduardo Becerra Lanza and Germán Pérez Alemán. Becerra Lanza, a 24-year-old medical student and student-union leader, disappeared on Aug. 1, 1982 after being arrested in a bar in Tegucigalpa by DNI agents, according to witnesses. He had participated in antigovernment demonstrations and had attended a meeting of student leaders in Nicaragua.

Pérez Alemán, a union leader, disappeared on Aug. 18, 1982 after being beaten and abducted in broad daylight and in front of numerous witnesses by six armed men wearing disguises. The family was told he had been detained because he made frequent trips to El Salvador; however, according to his family, he made the trips to collect payments of his Salvadoran father’s life insurance policy.

Families of the disappeared continually sought information from Honduran authorities and initiated legal actions to demand their release, all to no avail. Many received threats because of their inquiries. Toward the end of 1982, there were 69 families who had lost loved ones. Oliva, the Velásquez family and 10 other families founded the Committee of Relatives of Detained-Disappeared in Honduras on Nov. 30 to help families attempting to locate their loved ones. “Forced disappearance not only destroys the person but also the family,” Oliva said.

On Friday, Dec. 4, 1982, hundreds of families staged a protest in the Plaza de Merced in Tegucigalpa; the women all wore white headscarves. Since then, families have gathered to protest on the first Friday of each month. The crowds are smaller and children have taken over as parents have passed away, but the women still wear their white scarves.

Today Oliva, like many others, continues to search for her husband’s remains. “On the Day of the Dead, I don’t want to continue casting my flowers just anyplace.”

In recognition of the 25 years that have passed and in honor of the many individuals and families who have suffered, MISF Media has launched a new Web site feature chronicling every known case of disappearance and other major events related to this dark era of Honduran history. The feature, “Remembering 25 Years Ago,” which can be found online at www.mayispeakfreely.org, will be updated each month with a chronological list of events that occurred. 25 years earlier.



Photo courtesy of COFADEH

Family members of the disappeared continue their march.

While Two 1981 Murder Victims Are Laid to Rest, Their Families Pursue Justice

Luz Guillén still remembers the man who took her husband from their home in 1981. “He told me he was taking my husband to make a short statement,” she told the Honduran newspaper La Tribuna. But José Edelmiro López never returned home, and Guillén holds Capt. Billy Joya Améndola responsible. “I was left alone with three small children because of that barbarian.”

Guillén, the Committee of Relatives of the Detained-Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH) and other witnesses allege that military intelligence unit Battalion 3-16, under Joya’s command, illegally detained, tortured and killed López and his business partner, Ángel Rolando Padilla.

Residents of the rural town of San Esteban, Honduras, are still reluctant to talk about the violent deaths of López and Padilla. The two men owned a cattle business together and, according to those who knew them, were not involved in any political movements. One townspeople, who did not want to reveal his name, told La Tribuna, “Look, this happened because the men were successful in their business. That meant there was stiff competition for someone else. At least that’s what was said back then since the men weren’t involved in politics.”

Although the motive for their deaths remains a mystery, details of their detention have survived through eyewitnesses. According to the families of López and Padilla, members of Battalion 3-16 under the command of Joya took the two men from their homes on July 6, 1981. Padilla was later seen in a military helicopter, with visible signs of torture, including a missing eye. Witnesses saw López, his wrists tied, being thrown into a pick-up truck.

The men were found on the banks of the Rio Grande de San Esteban River on July 9, 1981. Both bodies showed signs of torture, according to eyewitnesses and family members and as reported at the time in the People’s Revolutionary Union newspaper. The men’s fingernails were torn out, their heads were smashed and there were bullet holes in their backs. According to COFADEH, the men had been executed and thrown from a helicopter. Neighbors said San Esteban was under siege by the military in the days following the deaths of López and Padilla, and the two men were not given a proper burial.

The case was reopened in 2002 when the families, along with COFADEH, filed suit against Joya for the execution and illegal detention of the two men. In August 2005 the court approved a petition filed by COFADEH to exhume the remains of the men for medical forensic testing. On July 6, 2006, 25 years after their violent deaths, the remains of López and Padilla were returned to their wives, and they received the kind of burials their families wanted for them.



Forensics specialists examined the remains of López and Padilla before returning them to their families.



The families of José López and Ángel Padilla bury their loved ones 25 years after their violent deaths.

Justice, however, remains elusive. The case against Joya is moving through the justice system at a sluggish pace. According to COFADEH, the stagnation is due at least in part to threats against witnesses. One witness reportedly changed his statement after being intimidated by defense attorney Nelson Barahona. In addition, Domitila Salinas, Padilla’s widow, alleges that Barahona pressured her to withdraw the lawsuit and even offered her money to do so.

Despite the intimidation, COFADEH and many of the family members are committed to punishing those responsible for the torture and deaths of López and Padilla. Guillén has vowed to continue her pursuit of justice. “I will not rest until I die,” she said.

A Step Toward Justice: Honduran Military Leader Found Guilty of Human Rights Abuses



MISF advisor Susan Peacock talks with Oscar and Gloria Reyes after their testimony in Florida.

“For justice ... I want to bring my little grain of sand for those who could not speak.”

—Gloria Reyes

In a historic ruling in March 2006, a federal judge in Miami ordered retired Col. Juan Evangelista López Grijalba, a former Honduran military intelligence chief, to pay \$47 million to six plaintiffs who were tortured or whose family members were murdered by Honduran military forces in the early 1980s. After more than two decades during which the Honduran justice system has failed to effectively investigate or prosecute a case, the success of this U.S. civil suit is a step toward justice.

The suit against López Grijalba was brought by Oscar and Gloria Reyes for torture they endured in 1982; by Zenaida and Ricardo Velásquez, sister and son of Manfredo Velásquez, for his disappearance, torture and extrajudicial killing in 1981; and by Martha Madisson and Karen Burgos, sisters of Hans Albert Madisson, for his disappearance and extrajudicial killing in 1982. The Reyeses and Zenaida Velásquez are now U.S. citizens and currently reside in the United States.

López Grijalba was in charge of military intelligence units in Honduras in the early 1980s, when hundreds of suspected “subversives” were detained, tortured, and disappeared or murdered as part of a Cold War-inspired national security doctrine. As head of the National Investigations Directorate (DNI) from 1978 to 1982, López Grijalba commanded operations in Tegucigalpa and oversaw the Honduran Anti-Communist Liberation Army (ELACH). In 1982, he was appointed director of military intelligence for the Honduran Armed Forces, making him responsible for all security operations, including those of the DNI, ELACH and Military Intelligence Battalion 3-16. Most of the documented human rights crimes of that era are attributed to these three groups.

Oscar and Gloria Reyes endured brutal torture at the hands of interrogators under López Grijalba’s command. They were abducted by military personnel from their home in Tegucigalpa in July 1982, interrogated about “guerillas” and “subversives,” and tortured repeatedly with beatings and electric shocks. After more than five months in captivity—first in a secret detention house, then at DNI headquarters, and finally in state prisons—the Reyeses were released on the condition of forced exile and a promise to remain silent about what they had endured. An eyewitness placed López Grijalba at the scene of their abduction, giving orders to his troops. At the time of their abduction, Oscar was a journalism professor and Gloria ran a mini-market from their home.

Hans Albert Madisson López was abducted by military agents on the same night as Oscar and Gloria Reyes and in the same neighborhood. Madisson, who was staying at his sister’s house down the street from the Reyes, was a university student with no known political affiliations. Many believe he was taken by mistake. Several days later, DNI agents informed one of Madisson’s sisters that they had “gotten rid of” him along the Northern Highway. Some time later, a bag of human body parts was found, including a dental prosthesis that Madisson’s mother identified as his. Finally, in 1995, the body of Madisson was exhumed from a spot along the Northern Highway; his body was decapitated and showed signs of torture.

Manfredo Velásquez, a teacher, graduate student and father, was last seen being pushed into a car by military agents in September 1982. His sister, Zenaida, stated that the day after Manfredo’s abduction she received a call from an anonymous source saying that Manfredo was being held by the DNI. A witness testified that while he was being held at a detention house where he was tortured by DNI agents, he heard a man in an adjacent room identifying himself as Velásquez and calling for help in a pained voice. According to evidence presented in the trial, Velásquez was ultimately murdered by ELACH, at the order of López Grijalba. Velásquez’s body has not been found.

The Center for Justice and Accountability, a San Francisco-based human rights organization, filed the civil suit on behalf of the plaintiffs in July 2002 in the U.S. District Court in Miami,

after it learned that López Grijalba was living in the United States and had been arrested for immigration violations. CJA lawyers, joined by pro bono lawyers in Florida, filed suit under the Alien Tort Claims Act and the Torture Victims Protection Act, which grant the right to sue for human rights abuses in U.S. federal court, regardless of where the crimes were committed.

The civil trial was scheduled for Oct. 18, 2004, but an immigration judge ordered López Grijalba deported to Honduras before proceedings could begin. His connection to human rights abuses was cited in the deportation decision. Because López Grijalba was no longer in the country and did not send his legal counsel to court, a default judgment was issued against him on Feb. 16, 2006, making him liable for the claims against him.

In a bench trial on damages on March 16, 2006, Judge Joan A. Lenard heard testimony from Oscar and Gloria Reyes. The couple gave detailed, and often emotional, testimonies about their abduction, interrogation, torture, clandestine detention and prison time, as well as the ransacking of their home and their exile in the United States. Asked why she brought this case, Gloria Reyes replied, “For justice ... I want to bring my little grain of sand for those who could not speak.”

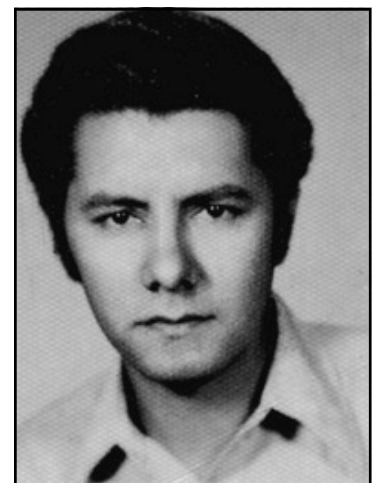
Lawyers also presented affidavits from the remaining plaintiffs and depositions of witnesses, along with evidence including declassified U.S. government documents. The judge issued a final ruling on March 31, finding that evidence conclusively established López Grijalba’s responsibility for the abuses committed and that the plaintiffs were entitled to compensatory and punitive damages.

“As a commander in the armed forces, López Grijalba possessed a duty to prevent abuses about which he knew or should have known. Instead, defendant López Grijalba participated in these abuses,” Judge Lenard said in a written ruling.

The judge ordered López Grijalba to pay \$5 million in compensatory and punitive damages to Zenaida Velásquez and \$6 million to Hector Ricardo Velásquez. She awarded Oscar and Gloria Reyes each \$14 million in compensatory and punitive damages, and the two sisters of Hans Madisson each received \$5 million.

CJA Litigation Director Matt Eisenbrandt praised the decision saying, “The court’s ruling provides a powerful condemnation of Col. López Grijalba’s barbaric behavior and complete disregard for the lives of Honduran civilians.”

Eisenbrandt also noted that the ruling was “significant due to the importance of Honduras as a strategic ally of the United States in the 1980s, when it was the hub of U.S. policy in Central America. John Negroponte, the current U.S. Director of National Intelligence, served as ambassador to Honduras from 1981 to 1985 and oversaw a massive increase in U.S. military aid to the country. In 1983, the U.S. State Department human rights report famously stated, ‘There are no political prisoners in Honduras.’”



Manfredo Velásquez was disappeared in 1982.

Human rights groups in both the United States and Honduras applauded the ruling and called on Honduran authorities to bring criminal charges against López Grijalba. On May 4, CJA attorney Almudena Bernabéu met with Honduran Attorney General Leonidas Rosa Bautista to encourage him to pursue a criminal case and offered to turn over all the evidence CJA had amassed during the civil suit.

After the Reyeses gave their testimony, Judge Lenard said, “I commend you for your great strength, both of you. It is important for the world to hear what you have said. Free people must know this truth to prevent it from happening to anyone else or anywhere else. I hope in my heart that you have received some comfort from the knowledge that your testaments today are now recorded in this public record.”

For the victims, telling their stories is an integral step in the healing process. And Judge Lenard’s ruling is a strong condemnation of and warning to human rights abusers who live in impunity, in Honduras and elsewhere. But, as CJA’s Eisenbrandt pointed out, justice will truly be served “when López Grijalba and other military leaders are behind bars.”

Full article at www.mayispeakfreely.org

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