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SEPTEMBER 21, 2020 • WASHINGTON, DC • HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATORS

Spain convicts, sentences Salvadoran man to 133 years for 1989 'Jesuit Massacre'

Former Salvadoran military officer previously sentenced in US for immigration fraud, perjury

WASHINGTON – On Sept. 11, the National Criminal Court of Spain convicted Inocente Orlando Montano, 78, a retired Salvadoran military officer, and sentenced him to 133 years and three months for his role in the 1989 murder of five Jesuit priests during the 12-year Salvadoran civil war. Montano, a former resident of Everett, Massachusetts, was extradited from the United States to Spain in 2017. His extradition followed a conviction for immigration fraud and perjury in the United States. The case leading to the U.S. conviction was developed by the Human Rights Violators and War Crimes Center (HRVWCC) of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and investigated by ICE

Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) in Boston. It relied and built on decades of efforts to seek accountability for human rights violations committed during the Salvadoran civil war.

“After over 30 years, Montano has had his day in court and will finally serve a sentence for his crimes,” said Deputy Assistant Director Louis A. Rodi III of HSI’s National Security Investigations Division. “This result shows the courage of witnesses and the dedication and expertise of investigators, attorneys, and experts from around the world who worked tirelessly on the long road to justice for the victims of this atrocity.”

“The impressive investigative work of HSI Boston special agents over several years helped lay the groundwork that led to the successful extradition and conviction of Montano in Spain for the part he played in one of the most notorious massacres more than 30 years ago during the Salvadoran civil war,” said Michael Shea, acting special agent in charge for HSI Boston. “The dedicated work of ICE, the Office of U.S. Attorney for Massachusetts Andrew E. Lelling, and the Human Rights Violators and War Crimes Center’s agents, historians, attorneys, and analysts ensured that Montano was held accountable for human rights violations.”

The Spanish court found that Montano, a retired career military officer in El Salvador and Vice-Minister of Defense at the time of the murders, was part of a meeting of officers that gave an order to kill Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría “and to leave no witnesses.” Ellacuría had been leading efforts for a negotiated peace deal to end the civil war in El Salvador. The killings, known as the “Jesuit Massacre,” took place at the priests’ residence at the University of Central America (UCA) in San Salvador in the early hours of November 16, 1989. An elite Salvadoran military unit, the Atlacatl Battalion, killed the five Jesuit priests, all of whom were Spanish citizens, as well as a Salvadoran priest, a housekeeper and her teenage daughter. The Spanish court explained that it could not convict Montano for the murder of the three Salvadoran citizens because he had been extradited to Spain from the United States based on the killing of the Spanish citizens only.

In 1993, after the end of the war, the U.N. Truth Commission for El Salvador found substantial evidence that Montano was part of a core group of elite officers responsible for the November 1989 murders, one of the most notorious human rights crimes in El Salvador's history. The U.N. commission also named Montano as one of two top officials who pressured lower-level soldiers to cover up the military’s role in the killings.

In August 2013, Montano was sentenced in a Massachusetts federal court to twenty-one months of prison for three counts of immigration fraud and three counts of perjury related to false statements he made to obtain Temporary Protective Status (TPS) following an investigation conducted by HSI Boston, with assistance from ICE's HRVWCC. At his sentencing, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Massachusetts presented evidence of his record on human rights, documenting more than 1,150 human rights violations committed by units or troops under Montano's command, including 65 extrajudicial killings, 51 disappearances and 520 cases of torture. In presenting his sentence, U.S. District Judge Douglas P. Woodlock quoted the final summation of Justice Robert Jackson in the Nuremberg trials when he said "if you were to say of these men that they are not guilty, it would be as true to say there has been no war, there are no victims, there has been no crime." Judge Woodlock then added, "In El Salvador, there was a war, there are victims, and there has been a crime."

Established in 2009 to further ICE's efforts to identify, locate and prosecute human rights abusers in the United States, the HRVWCC leverages the expertise of a select group of agents, attorneys, intelligence and research specialists, historians and analysts who direct the agency's broader enforcement efforts against those who are known or suspected to have participated in persecution, war crimes, genocide, torture, extrajudicial killings, female genital mutilation, and the use or recruitment of child soldiers.

Since 2003, ICE has arrested more than 460 individuals for human rights-related violations of the law under various criminal and/or immigration statutes. During that same period, ICE obtained deportation orders and/or physically removed from the United States 1,057 known or suspected human rights violators. Additionally, ICE has facilitated the departure of an additional 167 such individuals from the United States.

Currently, HSI has more than 165 active investigations into suspected human rights violators and is pursuing more than 1,640 leads and removal cases involving suspected human rights violators from 95 different countries. Since 2003, the HRVWCC has issued more than 76,500 lookouts for individuals from more than 110 countries and stopped over 325 human rights violators and war crimes suspects from entering the U.S.

Members of the public who have information about foreign nationals suspected of engaging in human rights abuses or war crimes are urged to call the ICE tip line at 1-866-DHS-2423 (1-866-347-2423). Callers may remain anonymous. To learn more about the assistance available to victims in these cases, the public should contact ICE's confidential victim-witness toll-free number at 1-866-872-4973.

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