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Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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Campaign and Advocacy



Zenaida Velsquez Rodriguez is a pioneer in the movement for human rights in Honduras and the sister of Manfredo Velsquez, who was abducted and disappeared by Honduran security forces. On September 12, 1981, Manfredo was kidnapped in broad daylight in the parking lot of a movie theater in downtown Tegucigalpa. He was never seen again. At the time of his abduction, Manfredo was 35 years old, a graduate student, and a teacher. He was also the secretary general of the Student Union and a well-known political activist. The Honduran security forces frequently targeted such community leaders who were perceived as threats to the regime.

Immediately following Manfredo's disappearance, Zenaida devoted herself to finding him and securing his release but was unable to save him. It is believed that security forces killed Manfredo after his abduction. In 1981, Zenaida filed a petition with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) in Washington, D.C., alleging that the Honduran government was responsible for her brother's disappearance. Between 1981 and 1984 the Commission received three additional petitions that reported similar disappearances: Saul Godinez, Francisco Fairen Garbi and Yolanda Solis (Cases 7951 and 8097).

In 1984, Zenaida made plans to meet with Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Perez Esquivel, an Argentinian who had come to Honduras to investigate human rights abuses. Zenaida had wanted to share a list of individuals who had been disappeared in Honduras with Perez Esquivel. As Zenaida entered the lobby of the hotel where he was staying, policemen took her from the lobby and, after a struggle, forced her into a car. They handcuffed her and drove off. Zenaida was able to get the attention of a friend she saw passing on the street. From inside the car, surrounded on either side by armed police, Zenaida lifted her cuffed hands to the window and waved them so her friend could see. Her friend immediately notified Honduran activists and other members of the international human rights community, who contacted Perez Esquivel, who announced he expected her freed to meet with him by that evening. Calls from organizations from around the world flooded the office of the Honduran Foreign Minister and Zenaida was released.

During her detention, Zenaida was verbally harassed. At one point, she was informed that the police had been conducting surveillance on her. Zenaida responded with the courage and integrity that characterize her life's work. She replied, I am glad you follow me then you know that all my efforts are devoted to finding my brother and the other disappeared.

In 1986, the IACHR concluded that the Honduran government was responsible for Manfredo's disappearance. The government, however, refused to cooperate on both the administrative and judicial levels, and failed to provide the IACHR with requested evidence and information about the disappearance. In response, on April 18, 1986, the IACHR submitted the case to the Inter American Court of Human Rights. In 1987, the Court held hearings regarding the case from September 30 to October 7. In 1988, when it became apparent to the officers of the Court that more witnesses, including former military and government officials would be available to testify, the Court ordered additional hearings. These hearings took place from January 18 to 20.

Witnesses scheduled to testify against the government began to receive death threats. Although the IACHR pleaded with the government to protect them, two witnesses were killed. Miguel Angel Pavon was assassinated following his testimony about the pattern of abuses perpetrated by security forces in Honduras. Sergeant Jos Isaias Vilorio, a member of the security forces who may have been involved in Manfredo's disappearance, was killed on a public street 13 days before he was scheduled to testify.

Despite long delays in the Inter-American case, Zenaida's efforts were not in vain. In 1988, the Inter-American Court issued a groundbreaking decision that a government can be held liable for disappearances and unlawful killings once it is proved that the individuals were last seen in the custody of government agents. Accordingly, the Court held the Honduran government liable for the disappearances and deaths of Manfredo Velsquez and the other three victims represented in the case, and ordered the government to pay damages to the families. The case, *Velsquez Rodriguez v. Honduras*, is a leading international decision on the crime of disappearance.

Zenaida did not limit her efforts solely to Manfredo's death. In 1982, she founded the Committee for the Families of the Detained & Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH), an organization that provides support for families whose loved ones have been abducted or murdered by security forces and death squads. Between 1981 and 1989, more than 180 civilians were disappeared by the security forces.

Zenaida herself received several threats and finally decided in 1988 to leave Honduras for the United States. She received asylum in 1994 and became a U.S. citizen in 1996.

Today, Zenaida is a public health educator for the county of Santa Clara, California. She continues her efforts to bring human rights abusers to justice as well as to improve the enforcement of human rights in Honduras and around the world. She frequently speaks at universities and schools throughout California and has testified before the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva. In 1995, she represented local non-governmental organizations at the World Conference on Womens Human Rights in Beijing. She is a member of the Board of Directors and a vice-president of Our Developing World (ODW), a non-profit group that focuses on improving education around the world. ODW provides schools with visual, print and hands-on training materials for teachers. They also maintain an extensive lending library.

Zenaida is one of six plaintiffs in a civil suit filed in U.S. federal court by CJA against Juan Lpez Grijalba, the former head of Honduran military intelligence. At the time of Manfredos disappearance, Lpez Grijalba was the chief of the National Investigations Directorate (DNI) whose members are alleged to have participated in Manfredos abduction and murder. The complaint charges that Lpez Grijalba planned, ordered, authorized, encouraged or permitted subordinates in the Honduran military and paramilitary forces to commit acts of torture, disappearance and extrajudicial killing, and then helped to cover up the abuses, including Manfredos disappearance. The complaint further alleges that Lpez Grijalba exercised command responsibility over members of Honduras most notorious death squad, which came to be known as Battalion 3-16. The other plaintiffs are Manfredos son Hector Ricardo Velsquez, Oscar and Gloria Reyes, who were both tortured by security forces in 1982, and two other Hondurans living in the United States whose brother was disappeared and killed.

Hans Madisson was a 24-year old Honduran who was forcibly disappeared and executed in 1982. Relatives of Hans joined the case against Lpez Grijalba as anonymous plaintiffs, out of fear of reprisals against them.

In 1982, Hans had recently moved to the Florencia Sur neighborhood of Tegucigalpa to live with his sister, Vicki, and to begin his engineering studies at the university.

On July 8, 1982, Hans called another sister, Vaike. He told her he was going to the headquarters of the General Staff to pick up a jacket from their brother, Gerardo, who, as a member of the military, worked at the General Staff headquarters. Hans left the Florencia Sur home of his sister Vicki at approximately 6:30 p.m. He never arrived at the General Staff headquarters to pick up the jacket, and he never returned home.

Approximately three days after Hans disappearance, on or about July 11, 1991, Gerardo was ordered to appear before an officer at the General Staff. The officer explained that the commander-in-chief, General Alvarez, and Colonel Lpez Grijalba had ordered him to investigate the Hans Madisson case. The officer interrogated Gerardo and insinuated that Hans belonged to a leftwing organization and used drugs. The next day, the same officer threatened Gerardo and warned him to stop searching for his brother.

On July 14, 1981, two DNI agents arrived at Vaikes office. The men told her that they had gotten rid of Hans along the Carretera del Norte (the Northern Highway). One of the DNI agents was a man named Florencio Caballero.

Meanwhile, the Madisson family continued their search for Hans. Some time later, a bag with human body parts and a dental prosthesis, like the one worn by Hans, was found. This was the familys first confirmation that Hans had been killed.

Finally, on October 25, 1995, the body of Hans was exhumed from a spot along the Carretera del Norte. His body showed signs of decapitation; multiple fractures of the skull due to blunt and sharp trauma: fractures in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th vertebrae; and sharp trauma on both femurs. The cause of death was determined to be a bullet wound in the neck.

Four years later, in 1999, Hanss remains were delivered to his family.

(Source: Reyes, et al. v. Lpez Grijalba, Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law, U.S. District Court of the Southern District of Florida)

Manfredo Velsquez was a primary school teacher while studying economics as a graduate student in Tegucigalpa. He also served as a leader of a socialist national student union.

On September 12, 1981, Manfredo was abducted from a street in downtown Tegucigalpa by seven heavily armed men in civilian clothes, two of whom were identified by witnesses as Sgt. Jos Isaas Vilorio and Lt. Flores Murillo. Manfredo was pushed into an unmarked white Ford and was never seen by his family and friends again. He was 35 years old.

A few days after the abduction, members of the Velsquez family filed a habeas corpus petition and eventually sought aid from the U.S. Embassy. None of their efforts succeeded in locating Manfredo.

According to sworn testimony, Manfredo was transported by his abductors to a secret detention center, where he was tortured. A fellow detainee named Leopoldo Aguilar is believed to be the last person to speak with Manfredo.

In a sworn deposition, Leopoldo stated that he was detained in September 1981 and taken to the DNI headquarters in Tegucigalpa, over which Colonel Lpez Grijalba exercised command and control. Later, Aguilar was transported by a man whom he knew to be a DNI agent, to a house some distance away. At that house, Leopoldo was tortured.

One day, Leopoldo heard a mans voice call out from an adjacent room. Although Aguilar could not see this man, he heard him say, in a pained voice, Help me, fellow. My name is Manfredo Velsquez. At some later date, Manfredo was murdered on the orders of Lpez Grijalba.

When Manfredos family inquired about his whereabouts, armed forces denied all knowledge of his disappearance. CJA client Zenaida Velsquez personally met with Colonel Lpez Grijalba, who denied having any knowledge of Manfredo. Lpez Grijalba promised to

investigate his whereabouts, but never initiated any investigation.

On October 7, 1981, Manfredos family submitted a petition against the state of Honduras to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, a body of the Organization of American States. In 1986, the commission referred the Velsquez case and several other forced disappearances cases to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

In July 1988, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights found Honduras responsible for Velsquez's disappearance.

Oscar Reyes is a native of Honduras, where he was a journalist and communications professional. He holds a masters degree in mass communications from the University of Minnesota and was the founder and director of the School of Journalism at the National University of Honduras. He has also served as a communications advisor to the Honduran Minister of Culture, Tourism, and Information.

Gloria Reyes is a native of Nicaragua, and an interior designer and housewife. In July of 1982, Oscar and Gloria were abducted from their home along with their daughter and two employees. They were tortured and then detained for more than five months before being exiled to the United States. In the United States, Oscar and Gloria have once again become prominent members of their community. Oscar is the director of El Pregonero, a Washington D.C. area Spanish-language weekly newspaper affiliated with the Catholic Church.

As a young journalist in the 1960s, Oscar moved to Nicaragua, where he worked for the newspaper La Prensa. Gloria was the daughter of a general who had been repeatedly imprisoned for his opposition to the Somoza regime. During Oscar's stay in Nicaragua, the two met and married. They returned to Honduras in 1970, and Gloria became a Honduran citizen. In Honduras, Oscar worked as a professor of journalism and as a managing partner of a documentary film and advertising company. Gloria was busy raising two children and running a market next to their house in Florencia Sur, a residential neighborhood of Tegucigalpa.

On the evening of July 8, 1982, members of the Honduran armed forces stormed the Reyeses market and residence. The attackers bound and gagged the Reyeses, their 12-year old daughter Gloria, and their employee Roberto Carrasco. Their housekeeper, Mara Acosta Ramirez, was abducted from a basement room. Gloria, Oscar, and Roberto were taken outside and forced into a van that drove them to another location. The Reyeses daughter and maid were taken away in another vehicle in the custody of police forces, and released the following morning. At a clandestine facility, Oscar and Gloria were separated from each other and tortured over a period of several days. Oscar was severely beaten and subjected to electroshock torture. Gloria was beaten, electrocuted and sexually assaulted. Roberto was also tortured. After a period of several days at the torture facility, the three were driven to DNI's headquarters in Tegucigalpa. There, they were again separated, interrogated, and detained.

After several nights at the DNI headquarters, Roberto was freed and the Reyeses were taken to a hearing in the chambers of Judge Wilfredo Madrid Paz. Judge Madrid ordered that the Reyes remain in detention pending an investigation of accusations of attempts against state security. For the first time since their abduction, the Reyeses were formally advised of the accusations against them, but still they were refused counsel. After the hearing, they were held in separate prisons for more than five months.

In December of 1982, after more than five months in detention, the Reyeses threatened to reveal photographs of their ransacked home and disclose to a newspaper the acts of torture and abuse that they had endured. As a result, the chief of the Honduran armed forces ordered them released, under the agreement that they would remain silent and immediately leave the country. On the evening of December 22, 1982, the Reyeses were released from prison under military surveillance to a house in Tegucigalpa and taken the following morning to the airport. Their passports were returned with exit only visas, and they flew that day to the United States.

In February 1983, within two months of their release and entry into the United States, Oscar applied for political asylum for himself, Gloria and their children. They were granted political asylum in 1988. Oscar was naturalized as a U.S. citizen in 1994. Gloria and the Reyeses two children became citizens in 1995.

Oscar and Gloria have suffered permanent physical and emotional injuries as a result of the abuse they underwent while detained. In 1997, Oscar began to tell his story. He wrote a four-part account in the Honduran press about his detention and torture as well as an article in his paper El Pregonero. The Reyeses also lodged a criminal complaint in the First Criminal Court of Tegucigalpa against Billy Fernando Joya Amendola, a member of Battalion 316, for his role in their abduction. The court, however, dismissed the case.

Refusing to give up, the Reyeses joined a civil suit filed in the United States in 2002 by CJA against Juan Lpez Grijalba, the former head of Honduran military intelligence. The suit charged that Lpez Grijalba planned, ordered, authorized, encouraged or permitted subordinates in the Honduran military and paramilitary forces to commit acts of torture, disappearance and extrajudicial killing, and then helped to cover up the abuses.

On April 3, 2006, CJA received a default judgment and concluded a trial on damages in the case. The court held Lpez Grijalba legally responsible for torture, extrajudicial killings and disappearances in the Central American nation, stating that his conduct was highly egregious. This is the first case in which a Honduran military leader has been held liable for human rights abuses committed during the 1980s.

Lpez Grijalba was deported to back to Honduras in 2004, and the Attorney General of Honduras approached CJA in May 2006 to assist in a criminal prosecution of Lpez Grijalba for human rights abuses based on evidence developed by CJA in our U.S. civil case.

As stated in a [Miami Herald](#) article on their testimony, Judge Lenard commended the Reyeses for coming forward. You have spoken the truth, Lenard told the couple when they finished testifying. A painful truth . . . but its important for the world to hear what you have said, especially in this forum, and in the history of this great country of ours, the United States of America.

For the Reyeses, the lawsuit is an important step on the road to recovery. As Oscar stated in an interview with the [Washington Post](#): I think its important for the world to know exactly what happened in that black period in our country and hold responsible the people who were in charge.



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***"We will never catch all the torturers—but we will always catch some,
and none of them will ever know who is next."***