

Twin Cities / Refugee's long battle finally ends; Once facing deportation for alleged death squad role, vocal Salvadoran critic of U.S. says deal 'bittersweet'

St. Paul Pioneer Press (Minnesota)

January 9, 2007 Tuesday

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Section: LOCAL; Pg. 1B

Length: 722 words

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Body

After nearly 25 years of fighting, waiting and crying, Gonzalo de Jesus Larin-Lara is **finally** a permanent resident of the **United States**.

But the **Salvadoran** immigrant doesn't feel like celebrating.

"This is a **bittersweet end**," Larin-Lara **said** Monday, days after he signed an agreement with **U.S.** Immigration and Customs Enforcement that would essentially **end** the government agency's efforts to **deport** him.

ICE had been denying his pleas for citizenship because it **alleged** he tortured and murdered people while he was a soldier for El Salvador's brutal Treasury Police. Larin-Lara had admitted to other offenses but never to those.

The Minneapolis real estate agent and maintenance manager was only briefly able to leave the country during his lengthy **battle** with ICE. He missed the funerals of his parents and a sister and, he **said**, was forced to drop out of law school.

Tim Counts, a spokesman for ICE, issued a brief statement from agency attorneys Monday: "The federal government withdrew its appeal as part of a settlement agreement with Mr. Hurtado. We entered into this agreement in good faith and expect that Mr. Hurtado did as well and that he will assist in bringing **Salvadoran** human rights violators to justice."

The 49-year-old **said** his life would have been much different without the government's **s battle** against him.

"I would have definitely accomplished more," he **said**. "At the same time, I cannot complain. The people at St. Luke have been a family to me. I would not have known them without this case."

On Sunday, Larin-Lara announced to his Minnetonka church — the "family" that has supported him ever since he sought refuge there in 1982 — that he wasn't going to be forced to leave the country.

The Rev. Richard Lundy led St. Luke Presbyterian Church in Minnetonka when Larin-Lara first arrived. The now-retired pastor and the congregation helped the refugee to speak out about the torture he witnessed in El Salvador. He had mixed feelings on hearing Larin-Lara's news.

"I'm happy that this has **finally** been resolved after 25 years," the Lundy **said**. "I'm sad that it took 25 years to get it done."

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Larin-Lara had been an outspoken **critic** of **U.S.** involvement in his homeland's civil war from the late 1970s through the 1980s. He adopted the name Rene Hurtado to protect his family back in El Salvador during his first few years in the **United States** and made numerous public pleas, often with a bandana covering his **face**, for the **U.S.** government to stop funding the El Salvador military.

ICE (formerly the Immigration and Naturalization Service) had fought his request for residency, **saying** it could not give asylum to Larin-Lara because he had admitted in early media interviews that he had raped, tortured and murdered people during his country's civil war.

Larin-Lara **said** he was misinterpreted during the interviews — he did not speak English at the time — and that his use of the word "we" in the stories meant that he was a member of the police force that committed the atrocities but that he was not an active participant. He did admit to beating two criminals, stealing from the police commissary where he worked and having sex with a woman as a bribe to let her go free.

Today, Larin-Lara, 49, is married with two children. He has a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Minnesota, and his friends, lawyers and an immigration judge have called him a respected and contributing member of society.

Still, ICE had appealed rulings to give Larin-Lara permanent residency three times. The last appeal came in early 2006, after a judge ordered that Larin-Lara would not be **deported**. Forced to file a brief by Monday, ICE officials decided to drop the appeal and came to the agreement, according to his attorneys. In exchange, Larin-Lara agreed to cooperate in any future cases against leaders of his **death squad**.

"I do believe that it's truly over," **said** Larin-Lara's longtime attorney, Kenneth Tilsen. He added that he and attorney Ron Rosenbaum have won this case several times and the evidence has always shown that Larin-Lara was a reasonable and honorable man.

According to immigration law, Larin-Lara can apply for citizenship in early 2009. He plans to follow through.

"This case is **ending**, and I can concentrate and live my life," he **said**."

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Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: IMMIGRATION (90%); **DEATHS** & OBITUARIES (90%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (90%); AGREEMENTS (90%); CITIZENSHIP (89%); TORTURE (89%); CIVIL WAR (78%); REFUGEES (78%); CHRISTIANS & CHRISTIANITY (78%); ADMISSIONS & CONFESSIONS (76%); LAWYERS (76%); POLITICAL ASYLUM (76%); HUMAN RIGHTS (75%); MURDER (75%); LITIGATION (74%); HUMAN RIGHTS & CIVIL LIBERTIES LAW (73%); HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS (71%); LAW SCHOOLS (68%); INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS (52%)

Organization: US IMMIGRATION & CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT (58%)

Industry: LAWYERS (76%); LAW SCHOOLS (68%); REAL ESTATE AGENTS (54%)

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Geographic: EL SALVADOR (94%); **UNITED STATES** (93%)

Load-Date: January 10, 2007

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