

## **SALVADORAN FIGHTS TO REMAIN IN U.S.;** **'80S PROTESTER HURTADO HAS HEARING TUESDAY**

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### **Body**

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When Rene **Hurtado** came to Minnesota in 1982, he was a 24-year-old illegal immigrant - a refugee from the **Salvadoran** military - with a deportation order he said he didn't know about hanging over his head.

He had found sanctuary in a Minnetonka church after moving from Arizona to Colorado and Idaho. Fearing for the safety of the family he left in El Salvador, he used a pseudonym and wore a bandanna over his face when he appeared in public to protest **U.S.** support of his home country's government.

Today he's 41, a father of two, a soccer coach and an ordained deacon of St. Luke's Presbyterian Church, where he lived in the third-grade classroom for the first six months of his Minnesota residency.

And after 17 years, he is still **fighting** the Immigration and Naturalization Service's attempts to return him to El Salvador.

**Hurtado**, whose real name is Gonzalo de Jesus Larin-Lara, is to appear **Tuesday** in Immigration Court in Bloomington.

"I think it's a tragedy that we're having to do this, but we're going to do it," said Nancy Berneking, a close friend and member of the St. Luke's congregation. She has known **Hurtado** since he arrived in Minnesota and expects to testify on his behalf.

"We're talking 17 years, almost half his life," she said. "To uproot him at this point is just evil."

**Hurtado** became an icon of the Twin Cities protests against **U.S.** involvement in Central America. He went on a hunger strike at Fort Benning, Ga., to protest training of **Salvadoran** soldiers and officers.

"He was a symbol," said former St. Paul Mayor Jim Scheibel. "It was a way to communicate to a much larger group of people why people were seeking asylum and coming to this country."

"The Twin Cities community had a lot of people that paid attention to what was happening in Central America," Scheibel said.

One of them was Andy Dawkins, a lawyer and Democratic-Farmer-Labor legislator who has represented St. Paul since 1987.

"I think that the **United States** government's involvement in Central America was very suspect for a long time, but it took a lot of Renes and (others) to get the rest of the country to see that we needed to change," said Dawkins, who attended some protests with **Hurtado**.

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The INS has opposed Hurtado's plea for permanent residency based on newspaper articles about his description of rapes, torture and murders committed by Salvadoran army members. Hurtado didn't speak English at the time, but translators said he participated in the crimes. Ron Rosenbaum, a lawyer for Hurtado, said in 1997 when the residency application was denied that Hurtado described what he only saw and that the interpreters got it wrong.

Neither Rosenbaum nor INS officials would comment on Tuesday's hearing or Hurtado's application.

Berneking believes Hurtado, who spoke out about the training he got from U.S. intelligence officers, became a target of an embarrassed federal government. Two former high-ranking Salvadoran officials - the head of the National Guard and the defense minister - have permanent residency and are living in Florida.

"These were the people who gave the orders - we've given them permanent residency," Berneking said. "It's quite bizarre they'd be going after someone who refused to carry out those orders."

As a congressional aide in the 1980s, U.S. Rep. James McGovern, D-Mass., monitored human rights violations in El Salvador and was the lead investigator on a United Nations commission that probed the 1989 murder there of six Jesuit priests and two women.

"I'm beside myself that they're here," he said of the onetime Salvadoran officials living in Florida. At the very least, McGovern said, the men were involved in covering up war crimes, if not giving orders for the acts.

He's not familiar enough with Hurtado's case to say whether he would support or oppose his residency, he said. But he said of former Salvadoran military men seeking asylum here:

"They're all Boy Scouts to the press, they've found God. But it doesn't change the fact they're responsible for the murders of hundreds of civilians.

"I understand his frustration" of knowing his former superiors are enjoying residency in Florida, McGovern said of Hurtado. "But as a general rule, my feeling is that the United States should not be a haven for people who commit human rights violations."

Berneking doesn't think Hurtado belongs in the group McGovern would bar.

"I believe he is truthful when he says that he didn't do that stuff. He certainly saw it," she said.

"He did a remarkable thing, to leave his huge family ... to come here and expose himself to risk, to tell the story of what was going on in El Salvador and try to stop the killing."

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## Graphic

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Photo: File photo

Rene Hurtado, fourth from left, was among hunger strikers demanding an end to U.S. military aid to El Salvador at a December 1989 rally in front of the Cathedral of St. Paul.

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