

Salvadoran May Face Deportation For Murders

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Body

An immigration judge in Florida has cleared the way for the **deportation** from the United States of Gen. Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, a former defense minister of El Salvador, finding that he assisted in acts of torture and **murder** committed by soldiers under his command during the civil war there, including several notorious killings of Americans.

The decision by Judge James Grim of immigration court in Orlando is the first time that federal immigration prosecutors have established that a top-ranking foreign military commander can be **deported** based on human rights violations under a law passed in 2004, in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, intended to bar human rights violators from coming to or living in the United States.

Judge Grim found that General Vides assisted in the killings of four American churchwomen on a rural road in El Salvador in 1980, a crime that caused shock there and in Washington and presaged the bloody violence that would engulf the Central American nation for the next decade. The immigration judge's ruling is the first time General Vides has been held responsible for those deaths in a court of law.

Five soldiers from the **Salvadoran** National Guard were eventually convicted of the killings and served long prison sentences. General Vides was the commander of the National Guard at the time of the **murders**.

The effort by Department of Homeland Security officials to seek the **deportation** of General Vides, who was El Salvador's defense minister from 1983 to 1989, is a turnabout in American foreign policy. He was a close ally of Washington throughout the war against leftist guerrillas in the 1980s, and was embraced as a reformer despite rampant rights violations by the armed forces under his command.

Judge Grim also determined that General Vides had assisted in the torture of two Salvadorans, Juan Romagoza and Daniel Alvarado, who testified against him in hearings last spring in the immigration court in Orlando.

"This is the first case where the Department of Homeland Security has taken this relatively new law and applied it to the highest military commander of their country to seek their removal," said Carolyn Patty Blum, senior legal adviser for the Center for Justice and Accountability, a nonprofit legal group in San Francisco that represented several torture victims in the case. She called the decision "hugely significant" for future efforts to bring immigration cases for human rights abuses against the highest-level military commanders and government officials.

Many details of the judge's decision were not available on Thursday, since in keeping with general practice in immigration courts, the ruling was not published. His main findings were described by lawyers familiar with the case.

Diego Handel, General Vides's lawyer, said he had not had a chance to read the lengthy decision and could not comment on it.

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The deportation case against General Vides was brought by prosecutors from the Human Rights Violators and War Crimes Center, a unit of Immigration and Customs Enforcement created in 2003 to focus on preventing rights violators from entering this country and deporting those already here.

General Vides contested the charges, saying he did not have any direct responsibility for, or even knowledge of, the murders and torture signaled by the government. In the hearings, witnesses, including former American diplomats, said that the general had been working to stop rights abuses by Salvadoran soldiers and to change the culture of a military known for brutality.

Judge Grim's decision confirmed that General Vides can be deported based on the rights charges brought by the government. Federal officials and immigration lawyers cautioned that there are still several steps to go before the judge will decide whether to issue a final order for the general's deportation. But lawyers said it would be considerably more difficult now for General Vides to avoid such an order.

A spokeswoman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Nicole Navas, said, "As a matter of policy, I am precluded from commenting on matters still pending before the immigration court."

General Vides retired as defense minister in 1989, amid praise from United States officials for his performance, and came to settle in Florida as a legal permanent resident.

But the family members of the four churchwomen, as well as some Salvadorans who barely survived prolonged torture during the war, have been tenacious in seeking to hold General Vides responsible for crimes of that era.

In 2000, a Florida jury acquitted General Vides and Jose Guillermo Garcia, another former Salvadoran defense minister who retired to Florida, of responsibility for the churchwomen's murders. But in 2002, in a case brought by the Center for Justice and Accountability, another Florida jury found the two officers civilly liable for the torture of three Salvadorans and ordered them to pay \$54 million. The deportation proceedings against General Vides stem from that decision.

The four churchwomen killed were Sister Dorothy Kazel of the Ursuline Order; Jean Donovan, a lay missionary; Sister Maura Clarke and Sister Ita Ford, both of the Maryknoll Order.

Sister Ita's brother Bill Ford fought vigorously for the prosecution of General Vides. Mr. Ford died in 2008.

"Since the women were killed my father made this the single purpose of his life," his son, Bill Ford Jr., said Thursday. Mr. Ford, who is the principal of Cristo Rey New York High School in Manhattan, said, "I'm sure he knows and is well pleased that one of the men responsible for ordering the death of the women or for the cover-up may no longer be able to live in this country to enjoy the fruits of his brutality."

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Graphic

PHOTO: General Vides in 2000.

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