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TRIAL OF SALVADORAN COMMANDER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES TO BEGIN IN MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

What: Colonel Nicolas Carranza, a naturalized U.S. citizen and former Vice-Minister of Defense and member of the High Command in El Salvador, will face trial in Memphis, Tennessee, for the plaintiffs' claims of torture, extrajudicial killing and crimes against humanity committed in the early 1980s. Five courageous individuals have come forward against Colonel Carranza to bring to light the atrocities that they and thousands of other Salvadorans suffered at the hands of the Salvadoran Security Forces and death squads. They are represented on a pro bono basis by the Center for Justice & Accountability (CJA) and the Tennessee law firm Bass, Berry & Sims, PLC. The trial is expected to last about three weeks.

Where: United States District Court for the Western District of Tennessee, Clifford Davis Federal Building, 167 North Main Street, Memphis, Tennessee. 9th Floor, Courtroom 4. Judge Jon Phipps McCalla presiding.

When: Monday, October 31, 9:00 a.m.

Who: The defendant is Colonel Nicolas Carranza, Vice-Minister of Defense of El Salvador from late 1979 to early 1981 and director of the infamous Treasury Police in 1983 and 1984. The plaintiffs allege that, as Vice-Minister of Defense, Colonel Carranza exercised command over the three units of El Salvador's notorious Security Forces, whose members often worked as or with plainclothes "death squads." Although Colonel Carranza had the power to prevent the gross human rights abuses committed by those under his command, his time as Vice-Minister and later as head of the Treasury Police marks one of the most repressive periods in Salvadoran history. Carranza came to the United States in 1985. He became a U.S. citizen in 1991. In 1984, The New York Times reported that Colonel Carranza had been a paid informant for the CIA. He currently resides in Memphis, Tennessee.

The plaintiffs are: Erlinda Franco, the widow of Manuel Franco, one of six pro-democracy opposition leaders of the Frente Democrático Revolucionario, the Democratic Revolutionary Front or FDR, who were abducted, tortured and killed in November 1980; Ana Patricia Chavez, whose parents were members of the ANDES teachers' union and were killed; Francisco Calderon, whose father, a school principal and a member of ANDES, was shot and killed right next to him; Cecilia Santos, who was arrested, tortured and detained for three years; and Daniel Alvarado, who was tortured by the Treasury Police and falsely accused of being involved in the assassination of U.S. military advisor Albert Schaufelberger in 1983. U.S. officials concluded that Daniel was not responsible in any way for the assassination, and that his coerced confession was a result of excruciating torture.

CJA is a San Francisco-based human rights organization that works to end impunity by bringing to justice perpetrators of human rights abuses, especially those who live in or visit the United States. The trial comes one year after CJA's landmark victory in which a federal judge in California found a Modesto man liable for the assassination of revered Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero. Bass, Berry & Sims is a leading Tennessee law firm with four offices in the state. Since 1922, the firm has been involved with many of the major business transactions and significant litigation matters in the region.

Why: The plaintiffs seek to hold Colonel Carranza responsible for human rights abuses committed in El Salvador under his watch. This is the first time he has ever had to answer accusations that he oversaw widespread human rights violations in El Salvador. Carranza has been living comfortably in the U.S. for 20 years, 14 of them as a U.S. citizen. The plaintiffs hope that this case will help to break the cycle of impunity in El Salvador and will deter future human rights violators from coming to the United States or committing abuses in the first place. The trial is also a continuation of CJA's efforts to hold accountable Salvadoran perpetrators in the U.S. and to unravel the culture of impunity in El Salvador. With the issue of torture in the daily headlines, this case attempts to strengthen the ability of victims to hold perpetrators responsible for their crimes. If the jury returns a verdict in favor of the plaintiffs, it will be the first time a U.S. jury, in a contested court proceeding, has held a military commander liable for crimes against humanity.