

For Immediate Release

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(Version en Espanol a continuación.)

**TRIAL ON DAMAGES AGAINST HONDURAN DEATH SQUAD
LEADER TO BE HELD IN FLORIDA FEDERAL COURT**

COLONEL FOUND RESPONSIBLE FOR TORTURE AND DISAPPEARANCES

A federal judge in Miami will hear testimony from torture survivors in a trial on damages against Colonel Juan López Grijalba, a former military intelligence chief from Honduras. López Grijalba moved to the Miami area in 1998. In 2002, six plaintiffs, five of whom reside in the United States, filed a lawsuit against López Grijalba for the torture, disappearance and extrajudicial killing of Honduran civilians during the early 1980s. In October 2004, while the case was still pending, U.S. immigration authorities deported López Grijalba for his involvement in human rights abuses. Judge Joan Lenard has already found López Grijalba liable for the abuses in the case, and she is expected to issue a ruling after the trial on how much López Grijalba will have to pay.

Where: United States District Court for the Southern District of Florida, 301 North Miami Avenue, Miami, Florida. Courtroom 7. Judge Joan A. Lenard presiding.

When: Thursday, March 16, 2006, 9:00 a.m. The damages trial is expected to last half a day.

Who: The defendant is Colonel Juan López Grijalba, a high-ranking Honduran military officer who lived in Florida from 1998 to 2004. In the early 1980s, López Grijalba controlled the notorious intelligence police force DNI (Dirección Nacional de Investigaciones, National Investigations Directorate), and the death squad known as Battalion 316. Both units were responsible for widespread human rights abuses in Honduras as part of a systematic program of disappearances and political murder. In 2004, a U.S. immigration court ordered López Grijalba deported for his participation in atrocities.

Plaintiffs Oscar and Gloria Reyes will testify at the damages trial. Members of the Honduran Armed Forces abducted and tortured them during a military raid in 1982.

They were forced to go into exile in order to secure their release from prison. They have lived in the United States since that time and are naturalized U.S. citizens. Oscar Reyes earned a master's degree in communications from the University of Minnesota in 1976, and founded and served as director of the school of journalism at the National Autonomous University of Honduras. For many years, he was the editor of the Spanish language newspaper for the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C. The Reyes family currently lives in northern Virginia.

Zenaida and Hector Ricardo Velásquez, the sister and son of Manfredo Velásquez, a university student leader abducted and disappeared by intelligence agents under López Grijalba's command in 1981, also brought claims in the case. In 1988, Zenaida won a ground-breaking judgment before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights holding the government of Honduras responsible for her brother's disappearance. Relatives of Hans Madisson also seek damages against López Grijalba. Honduran forces brutally abducted and murdered Madisson during the 1982 raid in which Oscar and Gloria Reyes were detained.

The lawsuit was filed on behalf of the plaintiffs by the Center for Justice & Accountability (CJA), 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. CJA attorneys Matt Eisenbrandt and Almudena Bernabeu are joined on the pro bono legal team by Ben Reid and Gus Bravo of the Florida law firm Carlton Fields.

Why: The case against López Grijalba marks the first time a Honduran military leader has been held responsible for human rights abuses committed in the Central American nation. During this period, a special military intelligence unit known as Battalion 316 carried out a series of abductions, disappearances and killings against Honduran civilians. The death squad operated in conjunction with the DNI and under the command of the intelligence section of the Armed Forces, known as G-2. As the head of the DNI in 1981 and the chief of military intelligence in 1982, López Grijalba exercised command over the soldiers who tortured Oscar and Gloria Reyes and murdered Manfredo Velásquez and Hans Madisson.

CJA Litigation Director Matt Eisenbrandt states, "We call on Honduran authorities to take the evidence we have gathered and bring criminal charges against Colonel López Grijalba. Here, our clients seek some measure of accountability for what happened to them and their loved ones. However, real justice will be done when López Grijalba and other military leaders are behind bars."

In the 1980s, Honduras was the hub of U.S. policy in Central America. Honduras served as an important base of operations for the Contra forces that were engaged in an insurgency against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. John Negroponte, the current U.S. Director of National Intelligence, served as ambassador to Honduras from 1981 to 1985 and oversaw a massive increase in U.S. military aid to the country. In

1983, the U.S. State Department human rights report famously stated, “There are no political prisoners in Honduras.”

Plaintiff Zenaida Velásquez, a health education specialist living in California, states, “The penalty we hope to achieve with this lawsuit cannot compare to what the perpetrators did to our loved ones. We must do everything in our power to stop the cycle of impunity that leads to more human rights abuses. This case is an important step in that direction. We will not give up.”

The trial comes only a few months after CJA’s landmark victory against Salvadoran commander Nicolas Carranza for torture, extrajudicial killing and crimes against humanity. A jury in Memphis, Tennessee awarded \$6 million in damages to the plaintiffs in that case.

For more information, please visit CJA’s website at www.cja.org.

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