

Rights advocates hail decision on former Salvadoran official

by [Chris Herlinger](#)

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(ENInews)--Human rights advocates are hailing the decision by a U.S. immigration judge that clears the way for the deportation of a former defense minister of El Salvador for his participation in acts of torture and of murder, including the 1980 killings of four American churchwomen.

The 23 February decision by federal immigration Judge James K. Grim, based in Orlando, Florida, sustained all charges the U.S. government had been seeking against the former official, General Eugenio Vides Casanova.

"It's a huge, very important decision and it was very gutsy on the judge's part," Almudena Bernabeu, an attorney for the Center for Justice & Accountability (CJA) a San Francisco-based human rights and advocacy organization long involved in the case, said in an interview with ENInews.

The U.S. Roman Catholic churchwomen killed were Sister Dorothy Kazel, Sister Maura Clarke, Sister Ita Ford and Jean Donovan, a lay Catholic missionary. Five Salvadoran National Guard members, who were under Vides Casanova's command, were eventually convicted of the actual murders.

Torture survivor Juan Romagoza, a plaintiff in one of the cases against Vides Casanova, said in a statement released by CJA: "This victory is not just my own. It is a victory for the entire country of El Salvador. The torture I suffered was not unique to me; it was the suffering of many innocent Salvadorans. It has taken over 12 years but time does not matter. We have never forgotten, and we will not give up until full justice is achieved."

CJA first filed a suit in the case in 1999. Grim's ruling is, CJA said in a statement, the "first time (in the U.S.) a statute enacted to facilitate the removal of human rights abusers has been used successfully against a nation's top military official." The

ruling was based on a 2004 federal law.

Bernabeu told ENInews that Judge Grim was not convinced by arguments that Vides Casanova should be allowed to stay in the United States because he believed his actions were in concert with U.S. national security policy at the time.

The U.S. government, under the presidency of Ronald Reagan, viewed the support of the Salvadoran government and military as part of its battle against communism, though U.S. churches and others condemned the policy, saying the Salvadoran government was a gross violator of human rights.

As many as 75,000 civilians perished in the Salvadoran war. Religious communities and clerics, like Catholic Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated in 1980, were targeted for their support of human rights in El Salvador and were called political activists by those defending U.S. policy.

The fact the U.S. government is now prosecuting Vides Casanova and other former Salvadoran military leaders now living in the U.S., and in U.S. courts, is an "explicit acknowledgment the Salvadoran government at the time went way beyond what anyone could defend under the banner of 'national security,'" Bernabeu told ENI.

Vides Casanova's attorney has not said if his client will appeal the decision. The next step is a formal deportation proceeding.