

NUN

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The kidnapping and torture last November of a U.S. nun working in Guatemala has set off a round of buck-passing at the State Department, causing international monitors to question the administration's stated concern about Guatemala's worsening human rights record.

The State Department's "Country Report" for 1989 recognized for the first time that members of the Guatemalan Army and police are involved in political violence. In March, when the State Department recalled Ambassador Thomas Stroock for a "consultation" on human rights, spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler emphasized the Bush administration's displeasure at the poor results achieved by years of U.S. training for Guatemala's police and judiciary.

But Tutwiler, who listed a number of unsolved cases in her briefing -- including the knifing of an American peace activist -- conspicuously failed to mention the case of Ursuline Sister Diana Ortiz. The official silence may be explained by the fact that Sister Diana's case raises an ugly possibility: that U.S. personnel know about and tolerate the existence of secret torture houses used by the Guatemalan security forces.

On November 2, 1989, two armed men abducted Sister Diana from a Catholic retreat house. A uniformed National Policeman drove them in a marked police car to a building where the three men sexually abused, beat and interrogated Sister Diana, and burned her more than 100 times with cigarettes.

As her captors were preparing to rape her, a man named "Alejandro" intervened, saying: "Idiots, she is a North American. Let her alone. It's already on the news on television." According to Sister Diana, he helped her get dressed, apologized for the "mistake," and told her he would take her to see a "friend" of his at the U.S. Embassy.

Sister Diana was convinced that this man who had authority over her abductors was an American himself. When his jeep stopped in heavy traffic in the center of Guatemala City, she jumped out and escaped. She sought sanctuary with the Papal Nuncio, then flew back to the U.S.

After her return, Sister Diana requested that Guatemala's President Vinicio Cerezo appoint an executive commission to investigate her case, because: "If the [National] Police will do this to the church, what does it say about what they do to the people of Guatemala every day?"

But Guatemala's Interior Minister announced that a National Police investigation proved that Sister Diana had engineered a "self-kidnapping." Minister of Defense General Hector Gramajo explained that she was trying "to cover up for... her involvement in a lesbian tryst." And President Cerezo suggested that Sister Diana had fabricated her tale to discredit Guatemala at the annual U.N. human rights hearings.

To its shame, the State Department's response was not much better. Sister Diana's attorney, Paul Soreff, asked that the department allow her to review photos of all U.S. personnel in Guatemala, particularly those working in training programs for the National Police, so she could attempt to identify "Alejandro." The State Department said that release of the photos would violate the privacy of its employees, and Stroock expressed his outrage at the absurd suggestion that U.S. personnel had cooperated with Sister Diana's

torturers.

When church officials asked the administration to pressure Cerezo to form an executive commission, the State Department said Sister Diana's case should be pursued through the court system -- even though the department's own report acknowledged that Guatemala's criminal justice system had failed "to detain or prosecute [human rights violators] who were likely to have been connected with the security forces."

Pressure from the Catholic Church has finally forced both the Bush administration and Guatemala's government to at least appear to take the case seriously. In early April, a delegation of U.S. Catholics, accompanied by Soreff, went to Guatemala to pressure for an investigation. They were welcomed by the Guatemalan Archbishop and other church officials, who accused ~~the~~ Cerezo's administration of covering up an increase in violence against religious workers.

Defense Minister Gramajo apologized to the delegation for his remarks about Sister Diana's alleged lesbian relationship, and admitted that the National Police investigation had been inadequate to prove a "self-kidnapping." And after reading Sister Diana's affidavit for what appeared to be the first time, President Cerezo agreed to appoint an independent investigative commission that would include the Archbishop of Guatemala. Ambassador Stroock and embassy staff provided support for the delegation's mission.

But despite these signs of good faith, serious problems remain. Cerezo's administration has so far treated human rights abuses as "a public relations problem," and its proposed solutions have been a "triumph of form over substance," according to Americas Watch. Even if Cerezo is sincere, it is doubtful whether the investigative commission will obtain the cooperation of the National Police or their chief, the Interior

Minister, who continues to insist that Sister Diana kidnapped herself.

It also remains to be seen whether the U.S. Embassy will cooperate with the investigative commission in identifying the alleged American, "Alejandro." Soreff says "It should be as much of a concern to them as it is to us to find out who he is," but the State Department has so far shied away from any internal investigation.

Congressman Ted Weiss and the House Foreign Affairs Committee are trying to keep the pressure on by conditioning "non-lethal" military aid to Guatemala on a serious investigation of several human rights cases, including Sister Diana's. But until the administration shows it is willing to investigate allegations that human rights violators exist in its own ranks, other governments will be justified in accusing the U.S. of hypocrisy, and American citizens abroad can expect no protection of their basic human rights.

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