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From Spain, Charges Against 20 in the Killing of 6 Priests in El Salvador in 1989

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Luis Romero/Associated Press

The funeral procession in 1989 for six Jesuit priests whose killing Spain says was planned by some of the top military leaders of El Salvador's civil war.

MEXICO CITY — A Spanish judge issued arrest warrants on Monday for some of the top military leaders of El Salvador's civil war, accusing them of meticulously planning and carrying out the killings of six Jesuit priests in 1989.

In a 77-page document, the judge, Eloy Velasco Nuñez of Spain's National Court, said the 20 men named in the warrants never had doubts about "carrying out the most execrable crimes against people merely to impose their strategies and ideas."

The attack on the priests — who were killed along with their housekeeper and her teenage daughter — was considered brutal even in a civil war known for its violence against civilians. It led to a crisis in El Salvador's relations with the United States, which had helped the country's armed forces against leftist rebels, and intensified international pressure on the government to enter peace negotiations.

Five of the six Jesuits were born in Spain, where judges have used the doctrine of universal jurisdiction to prosecute crimes committed outside of the country, as they did against the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet.

“When justice can’t be obtained in the country where the crimes were committed, it’s important that the process go forward,” said the Rev. Andreu Oliva, the rector of the Jesuit-run University of Central America, where the priests worked and where they were killed early in the morning on Nov. 16, 1989.

Among the men named in the indictment: Rafael Humberto Larios, who was the Salvadoran defense minister at the time; Juan Orlando Zepeda, the vice defense minister; René Emilio Ponce, leader of the Army’s Joint Chiefs of Staff; and Inocente Orlando Montano, the vice minister of public safety. Mr. Ponce, who is believed to have given the order for the killings, died this month in El Salvador. Mr. Montano is in custody.

“We wanted to walk the judge every step of the way,” said Almudena Bernabeu, a lawyer with the Center for Justice and Accountability in San Francisco, which brought the case to Spain’s National Court with the support of the victims’ families. “The defense has always argued that it all happened in the chaos of war. But there is no doubt that this was a very carefully planned military operation.”

The killings occurred as left-wing guerrillas were beginning an offensive against San Salvador, the capital. The rector of the University of Central America, the Rev. Ignacio Ellacuría, had been working as a mediator between the right-wing president, Alfredo Cristiani, and the rebel leaders. But some military leaders believed that he and other Jesuits at the university were collaborating with the guerrillas.

Under international pressure, a Salvadoran court tried nine men for the killings and convicted two officers, including Col. Guillermo Benavides Moreno, who witnesses said gave direct orders to the commando who carried out the killings. Both Colonel Moreno and the other officer were freed after serving 15 months under an amnesty declared in 1993. They are both named in the new indictment. Judge Velasco argued that the earlier trial was a sham.

Under the peace accords, the guerrillas joined the political process. Two years ago, their candidate, Mauricio Funes, was elected president and started a process of reconciliation.