

JESUIT CONFERENCE

the Society of Jesus in the United States

January 24, 1990

The Honorable Joe Moakley
Chairman
Leadership Task Force on El Salvador
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Moakley,

As you begin your efforts to monitor the investigation of the murders of our brother Jesuits and their coworkers in El Salvador, we would like to thank you for your willingness to take on this challenging assignment. Some of you were available earlier to meet and interview the two Salvadoran witnesses now under our protection, for which we have already expressed our appreciation.

The Board of the Jesuit Conference, in a November 17, 1989 statement to Congress, called upon you to bring the utmost pressure to bear on the government of El Salvador to end flagrant human rights abuses there. The Board called for this in the context of a halt to military aid, which thus far has encouraged the violent pursuit of victory rather than a negotiated solution of the civil war and which has largely failed in ending the human rights abuses and economic injustices that are at the root of the conflict. We think that the Task Force, by conscientiously following its mandate, will improve significantly the situation in El Salvador.

To this end, we would like to direct the attention of the Task Force to recent developments in the investigation of the murders, the reactions of the Jesuit leadership there and here to these events, and the linkage to the broader problem of human rights violations.

The recent announcements by President Cristiani and the court ruling implicating Colonel Benavides and eight soldiers of lower ranks give reason for some encouragement regarding the investigation. We share the sentiments of Fr. José Maria Tojeira, S.J., Provincial Superior of the Central American Jesuits, that "This is an important step, and we have to recognize the investigation of the actions has been very well done." (Wash. Post, 1/20/90).

Less hopeful, however, is the implication by President Cristiani that the investigation is complete. According to the Washington Post (1/14/90), he said his announcement marked the end of an investigation by the special commission he had created "to determine the exact circumstances and clarify the crime in all aspects and because the armed forces will not allow any members of the Institution to stain its professionalism and morale ..." (Wash. Post, 1/8/90, emphasis added).

The Auxiliary Bishop of San Salvador, Gregorio Rosa Chavez, has expressed serious scepticism: "We believe that such a grave act cannot be carried out just like that.... I think it is not enough to punish a few." (NYTimes, 1/15/90) The Jesuit leadership there has expressed similar doubts, both in the press and to us, that Colonel Benavides was sole instigator of the murders. In the opinion of Fr. Tojeira, "it would be rare for only one colonel to give that order." (Wash Post, 1/20/90). The media report similar opinions being expressed by diplomats and other experienced observers as well.

The Jesuit leadership in San Salvador has told us the fear that North American military aid may be cut is the major incentive to make the military and the politicians tell the truth. Similar opinions from diplomats and U.S. officials have been reported in the U.S. media. We would add that further progress depends on vigorous insistence by the Task Force that everyone responsible be brought to justice and that such justice requires timely indictments, prosecution and punishment of the guilty parties.

But the Task Force must, in our opinion, give comparable attention to the close connection of the investigation and prosecution of the Jesuit murders to the pursuit of justice in response to innumerable other human rights abuses, murders and disappearances.

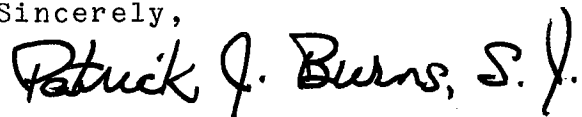
Justice for the Jesuits will not come merely through the punishment of their murderers. These Jesuits died in part because they spoke against the abuses inflicted on the Salvadoran people. The prosecution of this case must be part of a process of ending those abuses and reforming the Salvadoran system of justice.

Fr. Tojeira and the Jesuits in El Salvador are most ready to help you in this process.

Particularly because of their experience in investigating the killings of the four churchwomen in 1980, we have asked the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights to assist us in seeking a successful investigation of the Jesuits' killers. We would be very pleased if the results of their efforts on our behalf should also prove helpful to the Task Force in carrying out its mandate.

We are most grateful for your commitment to the work of the Task Force, and pledge our every assistance to your efforts.

Sincerely,



Patrick J. Burns, S.J.
President, Jesuit Conference