

Salvadoran goes to trial on war crimes charges

By Woody Baird
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MEMPHIS, Nov 1 (AP) -- A former Salvadoran Army colonel was in a US court yesterday to defend himself against accusations that his soldiers tortured and killed civilians during El Salvador's civil war in the 1980s.

A civil lawsuit filed against Nicolas Carranza accuses him of crimes against humanity. Jury selection in the trial began yesterday morning.

"This is a first opportunity for our clients to finally have a chance to say what happened to them, to explain to a jury and to the world," Matthew Eisenbrandt, a lawyer for the Center for Justice and Accountability, said before yesterday's court session.

Carranza, who has declined to talk about the specific allegations, denies wrongdoing.

He became an American citizen and has lived in the Memphis area since 1985.

The lawsuit, filed by seven current and former Salvadorans, says Carranza commanded military and police units that took part in a "deliberate reign of state terror" with the "widespread and systematic" use of torture and murder.

In a pretrial ruling, Judge Jon McCalla found that allegations of torture or witnessing wrongful deaths by at least four of Carranza's accusers were valid.

Thousands of civilians were arrested during El Salvador's 12-year civil war, and many who were taken away by military or paramilitary forces were killed.

The suit alleges that while Carranza was in charge of his country's top security forces, an estimated 10,000 to 12,000 unarmed civilians were assassinated in 1980 alone.

Carranza was vice minister of defense and public security for El Salvador from October 1979 to January 1981 and director of the Salvadoran Treasury Police from June 1983 to April 1984, it says.

News reports from the time describe the Treasury Police as one of the least disciplined of El Salvador's security forces.

Eisenbrandt said he expects the trial to last up to three weeks and include testimony from torture victims and specialists on the civil war.

Peace accords at the end of the war led to an amnesty that bars legal action in El Salvador against suspected war criminals.

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