



Foreign and Commonwealth Office

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El Salvador: Request for British Assistance in
Investigating the Murder of six Jesuit Priests

President Cristiani has written to the Prime Minister asking for British help in investigating the murder of the six Jesuit priests on 16 November. It is clear that the Salvadoreans have police assistance in mind. I enclose a copy of the President's letter, which has been faxed from the Embassy in San Salvador.

There is no doubt that President Cristiani was genuinely appalled by the murders. He immediately ordered a full investigation; and he attended the priests' funeral. We issued a statement at the time condemning the murders.

The Salvadorean Government has also asked for police assistance from Spain and the United States. Both have agreed (although Spain has not yet decided what form the assistance should take); and both hope that we will also respond positively.

Two of the Jesuits were Spanish nationals and three others of Spanish birth. They included the Rector of the Catholic University of San Salvador and other prominent intellectuals. They had been threatened before by extremists who saw them as supporters of the FMLN. According to a witness (who is now in the United States) the murders were carried out by a group of armed men in uniform who blew open the door of the priests' residence with a grenade. The priests' cook and her daughter were also killed.

The circumstantial evidence suggests that an army unit may well have been responsible. President Cristiani himself has not ruled out this possibility. After ten

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years of civil war there are people on both sides, including in the army, who regard it as legitimate to kill the intellectual supporters of the other side. The army, which has suffered many casualties in the recent fighting, may resent a real investigation. Army spokesmen have said that the murders were probably committed by the FMLN in order to discredit the army. Without genuine and open-minded cooperation from the army, the help of foreign police experts is unlikely to prevent the investigation from running into the sand. There would also be practical difficulties in sending British investigators to El Salvador (language, physical security, etc). Our police are also concerned at the duplication and wire-crossing which could occur if several foreign police forces were to be involved.

The Foreign Secretary believes that we should reply quickly and positively to President Cristiani but leave the details for discussion in San Salvador. We have spoken to the Home Office and the police, and we think that we are more likely to be able to offer some form of forensic help than to send police to El Salvador. He has asked our Chargé to take action with the Salvadoreans to find out what help they need.

/ I enclose a draft reply from the Prime Minister to President Cristiani.

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