

Accused soldiers will stand trial



AP/Wide World Photos
LIMITED SUPPLY — Yelene A. Bocharova of Leningrad clutches a coupon for the food-rationing program that began again Dec. 1 in the Soviet Union's second-largest city.

SAN SALVADOR (CNS) — The judge heading El Salvador's probe of the 1989 slaying of six Jesuit priests has ordered an army colonel and eight other soldiers to stand trial for the murders, a court spokesman said Dec. 8.

Under the order by Judge Ricardo Zamora, Col. Guillermo Benavides, three junior officers and five soldiers will stand trial for the Nov. 16, 1989, killings on the campus of the Jesuit-run Central American University.

However, leading churchmen and U.S. congressional investigators have said they believe the "brains" behind the killings remain at large.

Allegations of an attempt by top officers to cover up the military's involvement in the crime have also surfaced.

The murders, including those of the Jesuit's cook and her teenage daughter, occurred during a huge offensive by leftist rebels in the capital city of San Salvador.

"Zamora decided last night to send to the next stage the trial against the nine suspects for the crimes of murder and terrorism," court spokesman Mario Gonzalez

said.

Admirers of the slain priests say they were intellectuals who sought a peaceful end to the country's 11-year civil war and to the deep-rooted social inequalities they considered its cause.

Many rightists and members of the armed forces saw them simply as the brains behind the rebel Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front and accused them of spreading Marxist ideas among the nation's youth.

Solving the murders was one of the conditions set by the United States for unfreezing some \$43 million in military aid withheld in September, partly in protest at human rights abuses by the U.S.-backed armed forces.

The State Department said Dec. 7 it was speeding up the release of \$48.1 million in military aid due to the Salvadoran government this year and next to help counter a 18-day-old offensive by the FMLN rebels.

Benavides, the other officers and four of the five soldiers were arrested in January after an initial investigation ordered by

President Alfredo Cristiani found that troops had taken part in the killings. A ninth soldier deserted and will be tried in absentia.

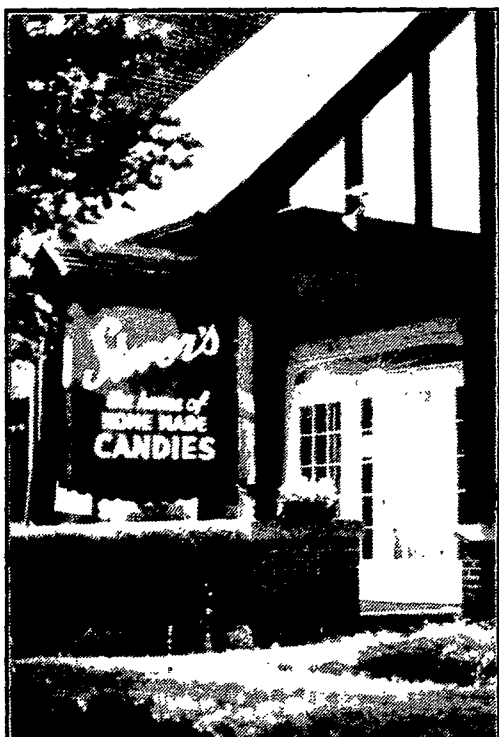
The eight victims were shot to death with high-powered rifles in a pre-dawn raid.

Zamora began the preliminary investigation of the murders more than a year ago to determine if there were sufficient evidence to take the case to trial.

Court spokesman Gonzalez said the defendants could appeal the decision to a higher court and that a date for the trial might not be set for at least three months.

Leading Jesuits, including the order's chief representative in Central America, Father Jose Maria Tojeira, have said there are indications that officers superior to Benavides took part in ordering the killings. Benavides is the most senior military officer ever to face trial in a human rights case in El Salvador.

A U.S. congressional task force monitoring the case and human rights groups have echoed the charges, accusing the military of a cover-up.



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