

Report on atrocities gets wide-ranging support

By Laurie Hansen
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — A U.N. report blaming high-ranking Salvadoran military officers for several atrocities has drawn high praise from a wide-ranging group, including El Salvador's top church official and the U.S. State Department.

Archbishop Arturo Rivera Damas of San Salvador told Catholic News Service March 15 that acceptance of the U.N. Truth Commission report would help his country move toward reconciliation.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher told reporters that the report was "important in terms of revealing the truth" which must be "a key element of an act of national reconciliation" in El Salvador.

Rep. Joe Moakley, D-Mass., who conducted his own investigation into the 1989 slayings of six Jesuit priests in El Salvador as chairman of a congressional task force, said U.S. military aid shouldn't be delivered or promised to El Salvador as long as senior military officials named in the Truth Commission report remain in uniform.

The United States, which at the height of the war in the mid-1980s was giving the Central American nation \$1.5 million a day in economic and military aid, often played down the level of abuses, according to the report.

During the course of El Salvador's 12-year civil war, the United States gave El Salvador some \$6 billion in aid.

El Salvador is slated to receive \$235 million in U.S. aid during fiscal year 1993.

El Salvador President Alfredo Cristiani March 14 proposed an amnesty for those named in the report as the worst violators of human-rights abuses, which included former rebel leaders and top military officials.

The U.S. Jesuit Conference in a March 15 statement, called Cristiani's proposal premature "unless and until

the accused somehow indicate that they accept responsibility for these crimes."

Archbishop Rivera Damas told CNS in an interview in New York that forgiveness might properly come after the committee's recommendations are implemented. He said if accused military officials were dismissed further punishment would be unnecessary.

The Truth Commission report named high-ranking Salvadoran military officers it said ordered the killings of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter in 1989 and the assassination of Archbishop Oscar A. Romero of San Salvador in 1980.

It called for immediate dismissal for 40 military officers linked to atrocities and for banning three prominent rebel leaders from holding public office for 10 years.

The report, titled "From Madness to Hope: The 12-Year War in El Salvador," was released at the United Nations in New York March 15, but elements of it had been leaked to the press days earlier.

Support for the report wasn't universal.

El Salvador's defense minister, Gen. Rene Emilio Ponce, accused in the report of having ordered the Jesuit killings, called the commission "unfair and prejudiced." On March 12 he offered to resign.

The Truth Commission report concluded that the U.S.-trained Atlacatl army unit was responsible for the massacres of an estimated 1,000 men, women and children in El Mozote in December 1981, shooting them "deliberately and systematically in groups."

At the time, U.S. newspapers reported the killings, but the State Department said there was no proof any massacre had taken place.

"That was due to lack of access," the State Department spokesman told CNS. He said a U.S. Embassy report on the alleged massacre had been inconclusive. "We were not able to get into the guerrilla-held area," he said.

In retrospect, he said, "the stories in

the newspaper at the time were professionally written and accurate."

Jesuit Father Joseph A. O'Hare, president of Fordham University in New York, told CNS that "the honor of our country was compromised" by its support of Salvadoran forces and by lack of concern for uncovering the truth about the crimes.

When four U.S. church women were murdered in El Salvador in 1980, "the U.S. position was that they were probably involved in guerrilla behavior," said Jesuit Father Charles Currie, who represented the U.S. Jesuit Conference in El Salvador during trials following the Jesuit slayings.

At the time of the Mozote massacre, "the U.S. position was that it never occurred, and for six weeks after the Jesuits were murdered by the army, the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador and the State Department said those responsible were quite possibly guerrillas," said Father Currie in a March 16 interview.

Archdiocese reeling over allegations

SANTA FE, N.M. (CNS) — Archbishop Robert F. Sanchez of Santa Fe announced March 19 that he has asked to step down as archbishop. The announcement came two days before a network television program accused him of sexual improprieties with several young women.

More than 1,000 people from different parts of the archdiocese made a pilgrimage to an ancient Catholic shrine in Chimayo, north of Santa Fe, to pray for the archbishop March 20, his 59th birthday.

The archbishop has been on retreat at an undisclosed location since early March, when it was learned that CBS television's "60 Minutes" had videotaped three women claiming that they had been involved in relationships of a sexual nature with the archbishop several years ago.

In a written statement released

March 19 by his chancellor, Father Ron Wolf, Archbishop Sanchez said he has written Pope John Paul II asking "permission to resign from my position as archbishop."

"He knows of my willingness to accept whatever decision may be made for the good of the church. I must now await a response from the Holy See," the archbishop said. "Please pray for me, as I do for you daily," he added.

The archbishop said he plans "to remain on retreat so as to avail myself of both spiritual and psychological guidance. It is my personal desire to thoroughly evaluate my life and ministry before God so that I may have a clearer vision of my life and ministry for the future."

In a statement 10 days earlier he acknowledged wrongdoing and asked forgiveness from those he had harmed or disappointed.

The "60 Minutes" segment broadcast March 21 featured interviews with three women who said that a number of years ago — when they were in their late teens — the archbishop had initiated improper activity with them.

One alleged a three-year affair. The other two said the archbishop had fondled them repeatedly over a period of time.

The report noted that a number of allegations of pedophilia have surfaced against some priests in the Santa Fe archdiocese. It suggested that Archbishop Sanchez might have been lenient toward pedophile priests because of his own involvement in illicit activity.

In Rome March 18, Pope John Paul II referred to Archbishop Sanchez before a private Mass with a group of U.S. bishops.

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