

## Ex-Salvadoran generals back in court

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WEST PALM BEACH -- Salvadoran generals who allegedly unleashed murderous men on nuns and civilians again faced accusers Monday in a federal courtroom.

This time around, though, the accusers are alive, seated 8 feet away from the generals who they say are responsible for their capture and torture.

Dr. Juan Romagoza, church worker Neris Gonzalez and teacher Carlos Mauricio sit facing former Salvadoran Gens. Carlos Vides and Jose Guillermo Garcia. Vides, 64, and Garcia, who turns 69 today, are both former ministers of defense of El Salvador who retired and moved to Florida.

In a stunning victory in November 2000, a jury found that the generals were not liable for the murder of American nuns and a church worker. An appeals court upheld that verdict last month, and on Monday, a second suit against the generals got under way.

For hours the first witness, Romagoza, described 24 days of torture while in the custody of the Salvadoran National Guard in December 1980.

At the start, the small, studious man described the acts clinically. He was hung like a human hammock in a cell, and prodded with electric probes so that he would give correct answers to interrogators' questions.

At the time Romagoza was training to be a surgeon. He said that the guardsmen shot at his left arm to mark him as a leftist and to keep him from helping the poor.

As Romagoza testified about the damage done to his hands and arms -- seven of his fingers are so damaged from hanging that he has no feeling in them -- his tears came.

"They were quite right," he said lifting both arms, his voice cracking. "I would never practice surgery again."

Romagoza said Vides, former head of the National Guard, once visited him in his torture cell at the National Guard's headquarters. Romagoza was blindfolded but said he's 90 percent sure it was the voice of Vides he heard in the cell. Vides joked with other officers about the doctor already smelling like he was dead and serving him the worms in his wounds for his dinner.

Romagoza said Vides stood watching when his blindfold was removed and he was released.

"Are you absolutely positive the man you saw is the man here?" asked his attorney, civil rights lawyer James Green.

Romagoza stared directly at Vides: "100 percent sure," he said.

Shunned by his fearful family after his release, Romagoza fled to the United States and now helps run a clinic for immigrants in Washington.

The civil lawsuit over the nuns' murders drew international attention as one of only a handful of cases tried against accused foreign torturers. The nuns' families asked for \$100 million in damages against the generals, hoping to drive them out of the United States.

As in that case, the victims don't have to prove the generals actually tortured the victims -- just that they had knowledge it was going on and failed to stop it.

The generals' attorney, Kurt Klaus Jr. of Miami, declined to give an opening statement. Klaus cross-examined the doctor, questioning how he could identify Vides through a blindfold.

Church worker Gonzalez was eight months pregnant when she was abducted and tortured. Soldiers balanced a metal bed on her belly and seesawed on top of it, Green said in opening statements.

Her baby son died two months after his birth from the injuries.