



El Salvadorian torture victim crusades

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When the photos of abused Abu Ghraib prisoners in Iraq were made public last spring, Carlos Mauricio began having flashbacks to his own experience as a political prisoner in El Salvador 21 years ago.

He was a young professor at the University of El Salvador in 1983 when members of the national police force, which was controlled by the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), arrested him. He survived two weeks of interrogation and torture at the hands of the El Salvadorian army before he was released.

Today Mauricio, now 49, still bears the physical scars of his torture, including broken ribs, an eye injury and persistent pain in his shoulders, joints and chest. The emotional wounds are also still close to the surface and may take a lifetime to heal.

He is still unable to discuss aspects of his torture because it is too painful. Those details he does confide are clearly tough for him to relate as he sometimes struggles to maintain his composure. The memories he is able to relate of the brutality of the death squads that terrorized El Salvador in the 1980s are too graphic for print. Last spring - two decades later - the memories came flooding back.

"WHEN I saw the pictures of the blindfolded Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib it brought back memories of what happened to me," he said. "I was also blindfolded. I knew the same kinds of procedures used to torture me followed in Iraq. When you are blindfolded, as time goes by you are reduced to nothing. You are unable to think or feel anything."

Mauricio and eight other survivors traveled across the country via bus from San Francisco to Fort Benning, Ga., to raise awareness of human rights abuses in South America.



CRUSADER for justice
Carlos Mauricio holds a small
plaque that memorializes the
death of a Jesuit priest.
(Photo by Frank J. Methe)

The caravan began in Los Angeles Nov. 7 and made stops in Phoenix, Tucson, Ariz., El Paso and Austin, Texas, and New Orleans, just in time for a week of activities at Loyola and Tulane universities to commemorate the 15th anniversary of the murders of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter Nov. 16.

Students erected hundreds of white crosses around the peace quad, each inscribed with the name of a torture victim. Mauricio and the other survivors spent two days giving interviews and speaking to students.

The tour ended at Fort Benning Nov. 19 for a weekend protest against the School of the Americas (SOA), now known as Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHISC). Along the way, the caravan picked up two college students in Texas who decided to tag along for the ride.

"I played a videotape I had with me, called 'We Are Salvadorians,'" said Mauricio. "Maybe that movie, plus what I said in my speech, moved them to join the caravan in El Paso. My original idea was to bring several buses, but it was not economically possible. What I am doing is making a path, getting experience and learning. I am committed to bringing the caravan from San Francisco every year until the School of the Americas is closed."

Mauricio has a personal reason for wanting the school closed. He contends that officers and soldiers responsible for some of the most heinous crimes against humanity around the world were graduates of the WHISC. He said he was captured by members of the National Police in El Salvador who were under orders from JosŽ Garcia (minister of defense, 1979-83) and Carlos Casanova (director-general of the Salvadorian National Guard, 1979-83), both of whom were linked to the School of the Americas.

THE PLAIN clothes officers walked into Mauricio's class and escorted him out of the building and forced him into an unmarked car. He was beaten and taken to police headquarters, where he was tortured and interrogated for two weeks. During that time he was taken out of the torture cell and herded into an underground cell with other prisoners. After he was released from the prison he found out that the International Red Cross came to check up on conditions at the prison.

Mauricio's captivity and release came during the worst part of the oppression, when some 30,000 people were killed by death squads backed by the military. Archbishop Oscar Romero, who advocated a peaceful resolution to the impending El Salvadorian civil war, was assassinated with a single bullet to the head while giving a homily in 1979.

Mauricio said the violence escalated after Archbishop Romero was killed and the persecution did not abate until 1989, after the murders of the Jesuits. The war officially ended Jan. 16, 1992, when a peace treaty was signed between

the government and guerilla forces.

"It is curious to me that the killing started right after Msgr. Romero was killed," he said. "They decided to kill him because he was the only hope of not having a civil war. He was the guy who was able to speak to both sides. They killed him to avoid having peaceful negotiations in the upcoming civil war."

MAURICIO left El Salvador and moved to California in 1983, the same year Garcia came to the U.S. Ironically, both Mauricio and Garcia applied for political asylum, which Garcia got and Mauricio was denied. Both generals Garcia and Casanova are now retired and living in Florida. Mauricio is determined to make sure everyone remembers their crimes against humanity. Two years ago he and two other torture survivors successfully launched a civil suit against Garcia and Casanova.

The three torture survivors were awarded \$14.6 million in compensatory damages and \$40 million in punitive damages. His dream is to collect whatever he can from the suit and use it to fund his group, Stop Impunity Project, a human rights group for El Salvadorian survivors of torture living in the United States. He also wants to fund other human rights groups in El Salvador.

Perhaps one of the blessings to come out of the civil case is the resolution of the Archbishop Romero case, which was based on Mauricio's case.

ALVARO Saravia was found responsible in September for his role in ordering the assassination of Archbishop Romero. He was ordered to pay a surviving relative of the archbishop \$10 million.

In the end, Mauricio said it is justice that keeps him going, not money. He said Stop Impunity Project and other groups have received a share of the \$400,000 that was collected from one of Garcia's many secret accounts, but it's just a drop in the bucket.

"I believe that I am alive because I have to renounce what happened," he said. "I am a witness, a person who survived the horror of torture in San Salvador. It is a moral issue for me because I am able to say what others couldn't because they were tortured and killed.

"When I was in Florida giving my testimony I felt that I was never alone. I felt supported by the people who didn't make it. It is my task to do it."

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[Front Page](#)

[Top](#)

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