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**EL SALVADOR "DISAPPEARANCE" OF THREE TRADE UNION MEMBERS
FOLLOWING MAY-DAY DEMONSTRATIONS**

Edwin Ernesto VARGAS AGUILAR (aged 20) and Luis Armando LEMUS URRUTIA (aged 24), both employees of the Beneficio Montealegre (Montealegre Coffee Plant) and students at the Universidad de Occidente (the university in the western part of the country), and Julio Ernesto GARCIA LUCERO (aged 18), a baker, were abducted by armed men in plain clothes on 1 May 1987. They were on their way home to Chalchuapa after having participated in May-day demonstrations in Santa Ana. According to an eye witness, the abductors drove a white Cherokee-type vehicle with darkened windows. Julio Ernesto Garcia Lucero is a member of the Sindicato de Panificadores (Bakers Union). Edwin Ernesto Vargas Aguilar and Luis Armando Lemus Urrutia are both members of the Sindicato de la Industria del Café (SI-CAFE), Coffee Industry Union. Luis Armando Lemus Urrutia is also a member of the Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios de El Salvador (FEUS), University Students Federation of El Salvador.

Upon learning of their "disappearance", the parents of the three trade unionists went to ask for their sons at the 2nd Infantry Brigade barracks in Santa Ana, where they believed the men had been taken following their abduction. They also asked for them at the National Police, National Guard and Treasury Police but all denied their detention. On 8 May, the Oficina de Tutela Legal del Arzobispado (Legal Aid Office of the Archbishopric) asked the 2nd Infantry Brigade in Santa Ana for information on the three men's whereabouts. They were told that no such information could be provided, for security reasons. The "disappearances" were also denounced to the International Commission of the Red Cross (ICRC), the various national human rights groups and to the governmental Human Rights Commission's local representation in Santa Ana. According to relatives, the governmental Human Rights Commission replied that at the time of the young men's abduction, the guerrillas were recruiting in the area and that perhaps they too had been recruited. There are serious fears for their lives.

In a writ of habeas corpus presented to the Cámara de lo Penal de Occidente (Penal Court for the western part of the country) on 12 May 1987 on behalf of the three men, Julio Ernesto Garcia's brother stated that he had learned through unofficial sources that his brother and his two friends were being held at the barracks of the 2nd Infantry Brigade of Santa Ana. He requested the authorities to appoint a Juez Ejecutor (Executor Judge: a person appointed by the Court to investigate writs of habeas corpus and empowered to visit the different security forces and ask to see the person who is being sought). Dr. José Ernesto Carranza Martínez was appointed as Executor Judge the following day and visited the 2nd Infantry Brigade barracks. There, according to Garcia's brother:

"Captain Contreras said to the judge that they had enough of this case and that the International Committee of the Red Cross and humanitarian organizations had come to ask about the case. However, the judge insisted that he had been appointed to look into that case and that it was his duty to check up on it. They told him that the men were not detained there and they didn't allow him to visit the cells. The judge also inquired with the Treasury Police and there they asked him if the men in question were not those who had been kidnapped by the guerrillas. When asked where they had received this information from, they said they had heard the news on the radio and then said that they did not have the men. The Executor Judge was to visit the 2nd Brigade in Santa Ana that day, having been told that he would be allowed to examine the cells. However, yesterday they did not let him in to see the cells, saying that the cells were not for holding prisoners but for punishing policemen."

Another source, himself a prisoner at the 2nd Infantry Brigade barracks in early 1986, denounced the existence of a tunnel there, claiming that prisoners were hidden in it when the International Committee of the Red Cross or other human rights monitoring groups came to search for them. He himself, he states, was taken out of the barracks and hidden in the boot of a vehicle, when an ICRC delegation came to look for him.

On 22 May, coffee pickers of 18 coffee developments all over the country, initiated a work stoppage, their main demand being the re-appearance of their fellow union members. The mothers of the three men went on hunger strike in the Metropolitan Cathedral in San Salvador on 6 June, demanding an investigation into their son's whereabouts. The mothers received no reply to their demands and the strike has since ended.

Amnesty International first initiated urgent appeals on behalf of the three union members on 7 May 1987 (UA 123/87 AMR 29/23/87). The organization is seriously concerned about their safety and fears that, if held in unacknowledged detention, they may risk torture, "disappearance" or extrajudicial execution.

BACKGROUND

Trade unionists in El Salvador have been a long-term target of human rights abuses. In January 1986, Amnesty International called for inquiries into some 50 separate incidents involving arrest, torture, "disappearance" or extrajudicial execution of trade unionists apparently because of their trade union activities.

The most recent incident involved the killing of Antonio de Jesús Hernández Martínez, Secretary General of the Asociación Nacional de Trabajadores Agropecuarios (ANTA), National Association of Agricultural Workers of San Miguel department. He is reported to have been seized on 16 April 1987 by soldiers of the 3rd Infantry Brigade in San Juan de los Velásquez where he had gone to distribute funds to peasant cooperatives to buy corn. His body, showing apparent marks of torture, was reportedly found on the banks of the river Chicuelo, San Juan de los Velásquez, San Luis de la Reina jurisdiction, San Miguel Department. An investigation carried out by the Oficina de Tutela Legal del Arzobispado (Legal Aid Office of the Archbishopric), suggested army responsibility. According to international press report, however, military spokesman Colonel Mauricio Hernández, who was asked about the case, "neither confirmed nor denied the army's involvement and said the military was not investigating it."