

Higher-Up Link Is Seen In Salvadoran Murders

By Al Kamen
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The head of a special House panel investigating the November 1989 murders of six Jesuit priests in El Salvador has concluded that it is "very possible" senior Salvadoran military officers, including the current defense minister, "ordered the murders."

Rep. Joe Moakley (D-Mass.), in a six-page memorandum to be distributed to House members today, said the defense minister, Gen. Rene Emilio Ponce, and several others in the Salvadoran military high command attended a small meeting at the Salvadoran military academy the day before the murders at which the decision was made to kill the priests.

Moakley, who has repeatedly accused the Salvadoran high command of covering up for the murders, said in the report that "direct and circumstantial evidence" supports the conclusion that the decision was made at the meeting,

Ponce and other ranking officers have denied prior knowledge of the murders or of any coverup.

The murders of the priests, their housekeeper and her daughter sparked an international furor that led to the convictions last September of Col. Alfredo Benavides and a lieutenant in the killings. Moakley said Benavides attended the alleged meeting. It was the first time senior officers had been convicted of such crimes in the 12-year-old civil war between the U.S.-backed government and leftist guerrillas.

Seven other soldiers, including four who recanted prior confessions, were acquitted of the murders, although the seven and several other soldiers face lesser charges of conspiracy or perjury.

In his memo, Moakley said his conclusion was based on information provided by "experienced, respected and serious" members of the Salvadoran military "who were in a position to know the information they conveyed" and who he believed were "credible and sincere." Moakley said none of them

was willing to be named because of fear of retribution.

Based on that information and "all that I have learned about the Salvadoran armed forces," he said, "I personally find this version of events more credible than the alternative, which is that Colonel Benavides acted on his own, notwithstanding the chain of command, and took upon himself the awesome responsibility for these crimes."

Moakley said that according to his sources, "the initiative for the murders came from" Gen. Juan Rafael Bustillo, then head of the air force and now assigned to the Salvadoran Embassy in Israel, "while the reactions of the others ranged from support to reluctant acceptance to silence."

Moakley said his report would likely be "the final statement that I will make" as head of the 19-member panel appointed by House Speaker Thomas S. Foley (D-Wash.). Moakley, citing limited civilian control over the military and the U.S. desire not to derail the delicate peace negotiations, said he was "under no illusion that the government of El Salvador is likely to take further steps to investigate this case, or to examine seriously the possibility that top military officers ordered the crimes."

But he said Congress and the administration should "bear this infor-

Kurdish separatists kill 4 in Turkey

ANKARA, Turkey -- Kurdish separatists opened fire on a passenger bus near Sirvan, a town near the Iraqi border, Friday evening, killing four civilians and wounding seven, Anatolia news agency reported yesterday.

Anatolia said the Kurd insurgents set fire to six vehicles before escaping on foot. The military was reported to have begun an operation in the region to capture the assailants.

mation in mind when making further decisions" on policy toward San Salvador.

Moakley's statement comes as the Salvadoran government and leftist rebels, negotiating for months with United Nations participation, appear to be nearing agreement on a cease-fire and peace agreement to end the war.

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the service's top officers, to correct deficiencies that were identified the inspector general's report.

Ruenzel said EB has already begun work on the three welding processes approved by the Navy. "We have resumed welding during the past several weeks, and we are making crack-free welds," he said.

In a letter to members of Connecticut's congressional delegation Thursday, assistant Navy secretary Cann wrote, "We view the report findings with concern and have determined that the lessons provided by this unfortunate case must be put into practice."

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published statement "announcing the existence of the Revolutionary Arab Brigade Organization," which it did not further identify

American and Scottish authorities Thursday issued arrest warrants for two Libyan intelligence agents for the bombing of the Boeing 747 over Lockerbie, Scotland, on Dec. 21, 1988, which killed 270 people.

The statement read on Iranian state radio called allegations of Libyan involvement "baseless."

"Those allegations are within the framework of a Western pre-arranged plot aimed at compromising the countries of the steadfast Arab front," it said.

The Lockerbie Indictments

IT IS A major development and a welcome one that American and British prosecutors have brought criminal charges against two Libyan intelligence operatives in the bombing of Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988 with the loss of 270 lives. The indictments resulted from a prodigious investigation of the physical evidence, the key element being discovery of fragments of a Swiss-made timer and of clothes that were determined to be in a suitcase with the bomb. No doubt Moammar Gadhafi is not soon going to allow extradition of the two suspects. But a process has been set in motion to deal with this terrible crime through the law and, if he flouts the process, to deal otherwise with his regime.

The indictments quickly met challenge in some American quarters. Earlier media reports, attributed to intelligence findings about groups and governments inclined to terrorism, had suggested that a Palestinian group harbored by Syria and hired by Iran had committed this atrocity. Are American officials now focusing on Libya partly to take the heat off Palestinians and Syrians, whose cooperation is sought in the regional peace talks, and also off Iran, whose cooperation is sought to free American hostages in Lebanon? That is the question being asked and, in some cases, the outright assertion being made.

It's not possible to put that issue to rest now. But it's necessary to note that there is a qualita-

tive difference between hard information that will stand up in court and the sort of intelligence information and inferences from past conduct that are common coin in the political arena. In this case, the Justice Department carefully offers "an indictment based on evidence we have to date" and holds open the possibility of more evidence to come.

Clearly, the United States and Britain think Moammar Gadhafi did it. On a previous occasion when the United States felt sure (without court evidence) that he had sponsored terrorism, it sent warplanes against him. The new indictments convey the unpalatable thought that the retaliation, rather than cowing the Libyan leader, fired him up for revenge.

The Bush administration says "all options" are open. It's consulting with friendly governments about further measures of international isolation of Libya, economic sanctions, including a boycott of Libyan oil, and military reprisal. It has the demanding task of not simply punishing an outlaw and deterring others but of ensuring the public safety at the same time. But meanwhile, it is essential for authorities to pursue the Lockerbie investigation further, no matter where it goes—in particular, to keep exploring those other involvements that many people think are being dealt with too casually or even covered up.