

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

August 15, 2016

The Honorable Barack H. Obama
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama,

We write to respectfully urge you to direct a review and declassification of U.S. military and intelligence records and reports that have not been previously released that relate to unresolved cases of disappearances and human rights abuses during the period of the civil war in El Salvador.

Your recent decision to order the declassification of records related to the dirty war in Argentina was an important and welcome step that will help uncover the truth about what happened in that country during that conflict. It demonstrates that you understand the pain and suffering of families who have long searched for information about what happened to their loved ones who disappeared decades ago – and the importance of how U.S. records might help facilitate clarifying the truth and strengthening justice in the countries where their forced disappearances occurred.

Recently, a group of Salvadorans and Salvadoran-Americans whose family members were forcibly disappeared during the Salvadoran civil war came to Washington to talk about their efforts to uncover the truth about what happened to their loved ones. They told moving and powerful stories about missing parents and loved ones. According to the 1993 U.N.-sponsored Truth Commission, which reported on human rights abuses during the 12-year civil war, more than 5,000 people were forcibly disappeared, most often by security forces or “heavily armed men in civilian dress.” Human rights and victims’ groups place the numbers as high as 10,000. None of these cases has ever been fully investigated. Many family members have no knowledge about what happened to their spouses, parents or other relatives, and they have never been able to bury their dead or find closure to their grief.

Family members and victims’ groups are calling on the Government of El Salvador to launch a commission to investigate these cases and identify what happened to the disappeared. This will require investigative capacity, forensic capacity, and access to military and intelligence records in El Salvador. We support this call, and we will be urging the Salvadoran government to create such a commission. We hope that you will do the same.


Today, as El Salvador seeks to strengthen its criminal justice system and consolidate the rule of law, and with a new Attorney General in office, it needs to address unresolved human rights cases, including these of forced disappearances. Creating a commission on the disappeared, and opening investigations into unresolved cases will not only bring a measure of closure to the families of victims, but it will demonstrate the government's willingness to overcome the legacy of impunity and to pursue abuses, wherever they may lead. These steps will strengthen rule of law and reinforce equality before the law in El Salvador, principles that both the U.S. and the Salvadoran governments have committed to as part of the Alliance for Prosperity and the U.S. strategy for Central America.

Investigations into disappearances and other human rights abuses would be greatly aided by further review and declassification of U.S. military and intelligence records related to those cases. In 1993, following the report of the U.N. Truth Commission, President Clinton ordered a review and declassification of State Department, military and intelligence documents. The released documents were extensive and have played an important role in subsequent human rights cases and in research on the events of the war. Between 1998 and 2000, further State Department and Pentagon documents related to the case of four U.S. churchwomen murdered in El Salvador were released in an unredacted format. Today, as Salvadorans and Salvadoran-Americans call for investigation of unresolved disappearances, and as other human rights cases move forward, it is appropriate and timely for the U.S. to consider a new review and declassification of all remaining records in relation to these cases and circumstances. Information in U.S. files could help identify individuals or groups involved in forced disappearances and provide insight and leads about where those forcibly disappeared were taken for interrogation, or where bodies were disposed. U.S. records might help identify some of the patterns of disappearances and give investigators clues as they pursue cases of forced disappearance or other abuses.

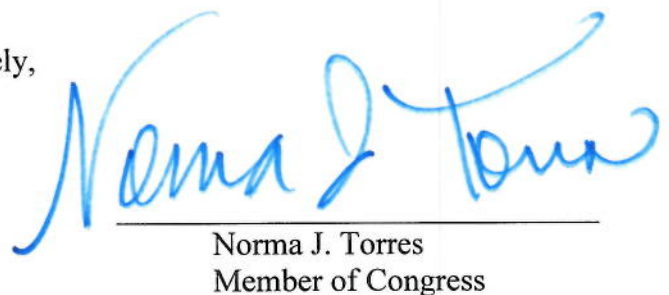
The United States played an important role in providing military, economic and intelligence assistance to the Salvadoran government, military and its allies over the course of the civil war. Further declassification in relation to unresolved cases in El Salvador could now help bring peace to the families of the disappeared and advance that nation's on-going process to secure justice and reconciliation.

Thank you, Mr. President, for your serious attention to this request. We look forward to working with you in the creation of a mechanism to declassify the remaining U.S. records related to these cases and to helping Salvadorans and Salvadoran-Americans recover the truth about their loved ones.

Sincerely,



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress



Norma J. Torres
Member of Congress

Barbara Lee

Barbara Lee
Member of Congress

Grace F. Napolitano

Grace F. Napolitano
Member of Congress

Jared Polis

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Tony Cárdenas

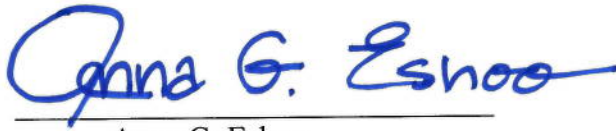
Tony Cárdenas
Member of Congress

Mark DeSaulnier

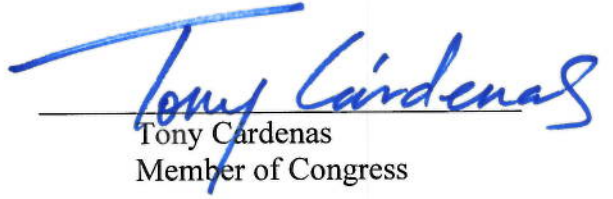
Mark DeSaulnier
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Jim McDermott

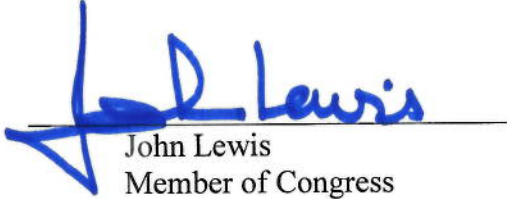
Jim McDermott
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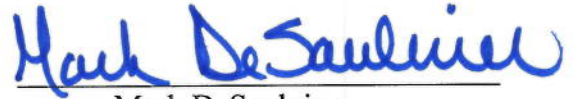
Anna G. Eshoo
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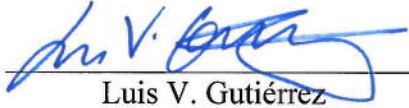
Denny Heck
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