

By Julia Preston

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After a 16-year legal battle, a former defense minister of [El Salvador](#) once embraced by Washington as a close ally during the civil war there in the 1980s, was deported on Wednesday after immigration courts found that he had participated in torture and killings by troops under his command.

The officer, Gen. Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, is the highest-ranking foreign official to be deported under laws enacted in 2004 to prevent human rights violators from seeking haven in this country. The expulsion culminates persistent efforts by rights advocates to hold General Vides accountable for his role in the 1980 murders of four American churchwomen, one of the most notorious crimes by the Salvadoran armed forces in that era.

General Vides landed at the international airport in Comalapa, El Salvador just after 12:30 p.m., one of dozens of Salvadoran deportees aboard an Immigration and Customs Enforcement charter flight, according to Mauricio Silva, a spokesman for the Salvadoran immigration agency. The general had been detained by immigration authorities in the United States since March 25.



Gen. Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova arriving in El Salvador on Wednesday. Credit Salvador Melendez/Associated Press

The deportation “sends an enormously important message to El Salvador and the rest of the world that we are not going to harbor people who committed these violations even when at the time they appeared to be supporting U.S. policy,” said R. Scott Greathead, a lawyer who represented William Ford, the brother of Sister Ita Ford, one of the murdered churchwomen. Mr. Ford died in 2008.

“I wish Bill Ford were alive today,” Mr. Greathead said. “We would be hugging each other.”

[In a ruling on March 11](#) that set a precedent, the United States’ highest immigration court, the Board of Immigration Appeals, found that General Vides had participated in torture and killings of civilians by virtue of his “command responsibility” when he led the National Guard and then the country’s military, from 1979 to 1989. On March 27, a federal appeals court denied his request to halt the deportation.

His removal was a remarkable turnabout in United States policy toward Central America since the Cold War confrontations with leftist rebels in the 1980s. Even after National Guard soldiers under General Vides had been identified as the churchwomen’s killers, American officials pushed for his promotion to defense minister, saying he was committed to improving the military’s dismal rights record.

Decades later, his deportation was pursued by American officials in a human rights unit in the Department of Homeland Security created to track down and expel rights violators.

Diego Handel, General Vides’s lawyer, said it was “a shameful day for the United States.” At the time when the general was defense minister, Mr. Handel said, “our government felt threatened by the insurgency in El Salvador to the extent we committed massive resources to dealing with it.”

Mr. Handel said, “We have betrayed one of the principal allies in that effort.”

At the airport, about two dozen people from a political party that supports the military greeted General Vides, calling him a hero who helped to stop communism from taking over the country. Some 40 protesters from a human rights coalition carried placards calling General Vides a murderer. They said he should be put on trial in El Salvador.

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After retiring, General Vides moved to Florida in 1989 as a legal permanent resident and had been living in Palm Coast. Now 77, he has not been back to El Salvador, Mr. Handel said.

But his sojourn in Florida was never tranquil after 1997, when Mr. Greathead and other lawyers working with Mr. Ford discovered he was living in this country.

A lawsuit was filed in Florida in 1999. But in 2000 the jury found that General Vides and another former Salvadoran defense minister, Gen. José Guillermo García, were not responsible for the churchwomen's murders.

In a separate case, another Florida jury in 2002 found both men liable for the torture of three Salvadoran civilians and awarded \$54.6 million in damages. General Vides has paid \$300,000 based on that verdict, said Carolyn Patty Blum, a lawyer for the Center for Justice and Accountability, a legal group in San Francisco that brought the case.

Under pressure from lawmakers in Congress after that trial, Homeland Security officials opened the deportation case against General Vides in 2009.

It is unclear whether he will be prosecuted in El Salvador. Ms. Blum said rights advocates hoped the deportation would help spur the repeal of an amnesty law, so General Vides "can face criminal accountability in his own country."

The amnesty passed in 1993 provides protection for government forces and guerrillas accused of rights violations during the decade-long civil war. But in recent years the law has been widely criticized, and a case currently before El Salvador's Supreme Court could see the law overturned.

Also on Wednesday, the Justice Department initiated the extradition to Spain of another former Salvadoran military officer, Col. Inocente Orlando Montano Morales, 72. He is facing charges in the 1989 killings in San Salvador of five Spanish Jesuit priests.