

THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

Memphian accused in El Salvador killings suit

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An unassuming great-grandfather who has been living uneventfully in Memphis was accused Wednesday of overseeing military squads who killed thousands of El Salvadorans more than two decades ago.

Nicolas Carranza, 70, declined to discuss the civil lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court but denied wrongdoing. "I have nothing to hide," he said in thickly accented English.

Carranza was vice minister of Defense and Public Security in El Salvador in 1979 and 1980, a period when civil rights abuses were rampant in that country. In 1983-84, he also served as director of Treasury Police. As many as 12,000 unarmed civilians were killed in 1980 alone, the lawsuit says.

Carranza is an American citizen living in a modest frame house in the Hickory Hill area of Southeast Memphis.

A 1984 New York Times article identified Carranza as a Central Intelligence Agency informant earning \$90,000 a year. Carranza denied this Wednesday.

The 1984 article also quoted American officials as saying there was no evidence Carranza was involved with death squads. Officials said troop conduct had improved under his watch.

Carranza came to Memphis about 19 years ago, attended the University of Memphis and then took a job as a security guard at Memphis Brooks Museum of Art. He rose through the ranks and retired as director of security two years ago.

The lawsuit was filed by the Center for Justice & Accountability in San Francisco. The organization has filed similar suits against nine individuals accused of war crimes in various countries, CJA executive director Sandra Coliver said.

In October, a Chilean army lieutenant accused of executing political prisoners during a bloody 1973 coup was ordered to pay \$4 million in the first U.S. trial stemming from the 30-year-old killings.

A Florida jury found Armando Fernandez Larios, now a Miami auto body shop manager, liable for extra-judicial killing, cruelty, torture and crimes against humanity in the weeks after Gen. Augusto Pinochet seized power.

The family of one of the victims sought damages under a 200-year-old U.S. federal law originally applied against pirates.

The family acknowledged it was unlikely they will ever collect but said that was not the point.

The lawsuit against Carranza seeks punitive damages; although Coliver hopes Carranza will lose his U.S. citizenship and be deported.

"Our objective is to make sure that the U.S. is not a safe haven for war criminals," she said.

She said Carranza was one of the worst offenders on the CJA's list.

Nashville attorney David Esquivel, whose firm filed the lawsuit for plaintiffs in California, New York and other states, said Carranza was not accused of actual murders but of overseeing troops and squads responsible for the killings.

"From 1979 to 1981, he was vice minister of defense in El Salvador, and in that capacity, he was in command of three security forces in that country," Esquivel said.

"During that time period, these security forces worked together with paramilitary groups that came to be known as

death squads. They perpetrated a wide variety of human rights abuses on the civilian population."

Plaintiffs include people who were tortured by security forces or who had relatives killed by security forces or death squads.

Carranza lives with his wife in a tan two-story home festive with twinkling Christmas lights. Stockings hang from the mantel in the den.

As his wife and young relatives bustled around, Carranza stood in the kitchen, speaking softly about his life in Memphis.

He said he had become an American citizen in 1991 and had sought to join the American military in the Gulf War, but was told "there was no need at that time."

As for El Salvador, he said the country was at war, "and they accuse me of being the death squad. I was not, of course.

"They are after every military person who was in higher rank. There are political motivations."

Carranza said he, his wife and a child came to America, and then to Memphis, where he found people to be friendly:

"It has been a good place for us."

Since retirement, he cares for grandchildren, tends the lawn and handles household maintenance chores.

He said he would be vindicated: "I never did anything wrong."