

MADRID — Nearly 20 years after the Salvadoran Army murdered six Jesuit priests in one of the most notorious incidents of the country's civil war, a criminal complaint filed in the Spanish High Court has revived hopes that those behind the slaughter could face trial.

Human rights lawyers filed a complaint with Spain's High Court on Thursday alleging that former President Alfredo Cristiani Burkard of El Salvador and 14 former members of the military played a role in the deaths of the priests and two female employees, and in an official cover-up that followed. The international outrage provoked by the incident proved to be pivotal in sapping American support for U.S. military assistance to the Salvadoran Army.

"We hope this case helps to reawaken the memory and the conscience of El Salvador's people," said Almudena Bernabeu, a lawyer for the U.S.-based Center for Justice and Accountability, which filed the case along with the Spanish Association for Human Rights.

The Spanish High Court must decide whether to press charges against the men and seek their extradition to Spain, Bernabeu said.

A Spanish judge, Baltasar Garzón, made legal history in 1998 when he secured the arrest in Britain of the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet by using a Spanish legal principle that crimes against humanity can be prosecuted anywhere. Since then, Spain's High Court has received cases connected to rights abuses in Argentina, Chile, Guatemala and elsewhere.

In the early hours of Nov. 16, 1989, members of the Salvadoran Army forced their way into the priests' residence on the campus of the Central American University in San Salvador. They ordered five of the priests to lie face-down in the garden and shot them, then searched the house, killing another priest, the housekeeper and her 16 year-old daughter.

A 1991 report by a United Nations-sponsored Truth Commission said General René Emilio Ponce, then chief of the army, ordered the killing of Ignacio Ellacuría, one of the six priests and the university's rector.

Ponce, according to the report, ordered soldiers to leave no witnesses to the murder of Ellacuría, who had promoted peace talks between the right-wing military government and Marxist guerrillas.

The complaint filed Thursday accuses Cristiani of helping to cover up a crime against humanity.