

Book Review: *In Search of Hidden Truths*

by Sarah Paoletti

In *In Search of Hidden Truths*, written by Honduran Human Rights Commissioner Dr. Leo Valladares Lanza and Susan Peacock, a fellow at the National Security Archives in Washington, D.C., is a critical examination of the U.S. government's procedures for declassifying documents pertaining to human rights violations. In trying to uncover the truths in Honduras' past, the authors inform the readers about the mask of secrecy that persists in U.S. government entities such as the Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of Defense and the Department of State. As illustrated in the report, the released documents provide solid evidence that the U.S. government was aware of human rights violations committed in Honduras by the Honduran military in the 1980s – in particular, illegal detention, torture and disappearance. Yet many of the documents released to date are heavily edited, raising more questions than they answer.

Since his appointment by the Honduran Congress in November of 1992, Dr. Valladares has worked tirelessly as Honduras' first Commissioner on Human Rights to uncover the truths about his country's past. While Honduras did not endure a civil war, unlike the neighboring countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, it did endure more than a decade of gross human rights violations. Furthermore, unlike countries such as El Salvador

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and Guatemala, in which truth commissions were established to investigate past human rights violations, Honduras has only the Office of the Human Rights Commissioner. The Commissioner works together with the Public Ministry and the Attorney General to serve as a truth commission—providing peace and reconciliation through investigation and recognition of past rights violations.

In 1994, Dr. Valladares published *The Facts Speak for Themselves: A Preliminary Report on the Disappeared in Hon-*

duras 1980-1993. In this report, Dr. Valladares provided the chronology of events in Honduras and other countries which impacted the internal affairs of Honduras. The report identified 184 people disappeared between 1980 and 1993, giving detailed accounts of 14 cases of disappearance. Dr. Valladares called for further investigation into the decade of disappearances, the role of the Honduran military, and the role of the United States and Argentine governments in the commission of human rights violations. When he began investigating *The Facts Speak for Themselves*, Dr. Valladares sought the cooperation of the governments of Honduras, Argentina, and the United States. In spite of pledges from each government to cooperate, Dr. Valladares' requests for information have resulted in little information beyond that which he had already gathered from the newspapers. After identifying the location of an archive in the military intelligence offices in the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa, investigators arrived to discover empty file cabinets. They were told that military files are burned every five years for reasons of space. Argentina, whose agents were closely tied with the Honduran military, and who trained Nicaraguan contras in Honduras in the early 1980s, has turned over only a slim file of useful documentation. The Human Rights Commissioner, therefore, has focused his energies over the past four years on seeking the declassification of documents from the U.S. government. *In Search of Hidden Truths* documents the investigatory efforts undertaken by Dr. Valladares and others since the publication of *The Facts Speak for Themselves*.

In Search of Hidden Truths instructs readers on the process of obtaining records from the U.S. government through Freedom of Information Act ("FOIA") requests, and government-to-government requests. It details declassification efforts made by the Commissioner, the *The Baltimore Sun*, former Ambassador to Honduras Jack Binns, and the family of Father James Carney, an American Jesuit priest who disappeared in Honduras in the summer of 1984. Included in the report's extensive appendices are copies of communications between Dr. Valladares and President Clinton, as well as letters from members of Congress to President Clinton regarding the declassification of U.S. government documents. The authors comment that, while the Clin-



ton Administration has repeatedly vowed to cooperate with these requests, "the response has been excruciatingly slow, and the amount of substantive human rights information gleaned from the documents released to date has been bitterly disappointing." Dr. Valladares has received thousands of pages of declassified documents, but many of them are heavily, if not totally edited, and most of the information that has not been blacked-out is information that was already available to the Human Rights Commissioner.

In addition to providing an overview of the declassification process and the efforts made on behalf of the disappeared in Honduras, *In Search of Hidden Truths* closely examines the information which the United States government has been willing to provide in the case of Father Carney. Father Carney had served for nearly twenty years in a Jesuit mission in Honduras. In 1974 he became a naturalized Honduran citizen. Viewed as a controversial figure by the Honduran military government, he was expelled from Honduras in 1979, and his Honduran citizenship was revoked. He became a parish priest in Nicaragua, and in July of 1983, Fr. Carney re-entered Honduras as the chaplain of a small guerrilla column of the Central America Revolutionary Workers Party. He disappeared in September 1983. In October of 1983, and again in August of 1984, Father Carney's siblings submitted FOIA requests seeking information about the disappearance of their brother. When Dr. Valladares was appointed Human Rights Commissioner of Honduras, he

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CENTER NEWS

The 1998 academic year began with a lecture series sponsored by the School of Communication and the Kay Spiritual Life Center on January 29th with **Zazi Sadou**, a journalist and women's rights activist in Algeria, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As a founder of the Algerian Assembly of Democratic Women, Zazi Sadou has affirmatively defended the rights of women against acts of terror including rape and mutilation. In early February, WCL sponsored a discussion with **Kirk Childress**, a Senior Staff attorney with the Servicemembers Legal Defense Fund. The discussion focused on the case of Timothy McVeigh, a sailor, who had an America On Line (AOL) user profile which identified his marital status as gay. Consequently the Navy accessed McVeigh's AOL account and discharged McVeigh for homosexuality. The discussion centered on Federal District Court Judge Stanley Sporkin's enjoinder of the Navy's discharge of McVeigh and the issue of electronic privacy.

The Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law continued the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights with the **Asia-Pacific** conference on January 30th & 31st which was sponsored by the Asia Pacific Center for

Justice and Peace. The two day Conference explored the ongoing debate of the universality of human rights in the Asia Pacific context. Prominent human rights expert Professor Yash Gai, the keynote speaker from the University of Hong Kong addressed current issues in the Asia Pacific region and the history of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The conference included panelists from NGO's such as the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation, Bread for the World, and Amnesty International who held workshops that focused on socio-economic development, the right to free expression, and statehood and self-determination. WCL Professor Daniel Bradlow and Professor Herman Schwartz participated in the different panel discussions.

On February 27, 1998, WCL sponsored a panel discussion entitled **Is the Experience of the Landmines Campaign Unique or is it a Model for International Lawmaking?** The informal round table brought together practitioners from various fields to discuss whether and how the international landmines campaign experience could be translated into a model for international treaty-making and policies in other areas such as human rights, the environment, development, and arms control. Panelists included WCL Associate Professor Kenneth Anderson, WCL Professor Daniel Bradlow, Steve Goose, Program Director



Victoria Corpuz, left, Tebtebba Foundation Inc. Indigenous Peoples International Center for Policy Research and Education, Philippines. Xiaorong Li, right, Institute of Philosophy and Public Policy, University of Maryland

for Human Rights Watch Arms Division, David Hunter from the Center for International Environmental Law, Patricia Irvin from Cooper, Liebowitz, Royster & Wright, Charlotte Ku from the American Society of International Law, Bob Lawson from Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs, Charles Maynes, President of the Eurasia Foundation, Ann Peters, Director of the Open Society Institute Landmines Project, David Rieff, journalist, and Jody Williams, 1997 Nobel Peace Prize Winner.

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joined in their efforts by filing a government-to-government request, which included a solicitation for any information the U.S. government might have regarding Father Carney's case. In analyzing the documents declassified by the U.S. government since Father Carney's disappearance, the authors raise critical questions about gaps in information, as well as inconsistencies in the facts that the U.S. government has provided. They conclude that "[t]he paucity of documents and the abundance of black ink belies the U.S. government's clear reluctance to release human rights information on the case of Father Carney." The remaining question is: "Why is there so much resistance to providing this information to Honduran authorities and to the U.S. public?"

In Search of Hidden Truths concludes with reflections on the efforts the Human Rights Commissioner, the Pub-

lic Ministry, the family of Father Carney, and others have made to uncover the dirty truths behind the disappearance of 184 people in Honduras during the 1980s, and the roles played by the Argentine military forces and the U.S. government in these disappearances. The authors conclude: "While there is no doubt that the CIA, the Pentagon, and other U.S. agencies have numerous classified records relating to Honduran intelligence operations and the human rights violations that were committed, the most important of these documents have not been provided." While *In Search of Hidden Truths* provides the reader with a glimpse of the arduous job the Human Rights Commissioner has undertaken and the frustrations encountered in the process, the authors express in the conclusion their fervent and optimistic hope that the Clinton Administration will honor its commitment to fully support and assist the

Commissioner's investigative work, emphasizing the importance of full access to U.S. government documents to "the search for truth and justice."

Dr. Valladares has garnered the attention and support of many members of Congress, who have joined in his battle for the truth. In October of 1997, members of Congress introduced "The Human Rights Information Act," which seeks to assure prompt and complete declassification of documents pertaining to human rights abuses in both Honduras and Guatemala. ☉

**In Search of Hidden Truths is available in English and Spanish from the National Security Archives, in Washington, D.C.*

***For more information on "The Human Rights Information Act," please contact the offices of Senator Dodd (D-CT), Congressman Lantos (D-CA) or the Latin America Working Group (lawg@igc.apc.org).*