

Langley dad from El Salvador fighting deportation order

Father of three trying to stop his removal over youthful ties to 'terrorist' FMLN

BY LAURA BAZIUK, THE PROVINCE MAY 27, 2010 9:07 AM



Langley father of three Jose Figueroa faces deportation after calling Canada home for 13 years.

Photograph by: Les Bazso, PNG

The phone is ringing off the hook and papers cover every available surface at Jose Figueroa's house.

The Langley father of three is busy trying to stop his deportation to his native El Salvador, as ordered earlier this month by Canada's Immigration and Refugee Board.

Figueroa said he was disappointed when he got the letter last December that said he had been involved with a "terrorist" organization in his youth, and so would be deported. He said the allegations against the organization of which he was a member are false, and he is determined to appeal the board's decision.

"I'm not leaving my kids," the 44-year-old told *The Province* Wednesday at his home. "The FMLN has never been a terrorist organization."

The FMLN, or the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, was a collection of five left-wing groups

that fought against an oppressive right-wing state responsible for death-squad killings. Figueroa had helped build support for the group in the 1980s, when El Salvador was embroiled in civil war. After a UN-sponsored peace deal in 1992, the FMLN took office, and still governs the country.

When Figueroa and his family arrived in Canada 13 years ago and applied for refugee status, officials noted his FMLN involvement, but said nothing about deportation, he said. "It's 13 years after the fact. Why now?" he said.

At the immigration hearing, review board member Otto Nupponen said Figueroa was a member of an organization that had been involved in terrorism during the civil war — namely attacks on mayors loyal to the state.

Figueroa said the FMLN isn't on any terrorist list, and Nupponen agreed, but said some groups not listed have later been determined to be terrorist organizations.

Figueroa has filed for a judicial review of Nupponen's decision, and is now waiting for the Ministry of Public Safety to respond.

Steve Stewart, program director of Co-Development Canada, which fosters links between Canadian and Latin American organizations, calls Nupponen's decision "amusing."

He said after El Salvador's civil war, a UN Truth Commission found that 85 per cent of violent activity was attributed to the state, while only five per cent was attributed to the FMLN.

"To call an organization that was fighting a regime that was responsible for such widespread violations is extreme," Stewart said.

And for the thousands of other Salvadorans in the Lower Mainland who don't yet have citizenship, many of whom would have had links to the FMLN, Nupponen's ruling "could open a major can of worms."

Nupponen did acknowledge that Figueroa "had nothing to do with the more violent activities of the organization," and that he could request the minister exempt him on those grounds.

Figueroa is now meeting with lawyers, taking calls from supporters and trying to set up a trust fund at his church for legal costs. "I know these allegations aren't true," he said, "and I'll do whatever it takes to prove it."

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