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Reprieve for Christic Institute

\$1 Million Penalty Delayed During Appeal

Associated Press

A Supreme Court justice yesterday temporarily shielded a public policy and law center and two journalists from having to pay more than \$1 million in sanctions for suing over a bomb explosion at a 1984 news conference in Nicaragua.

Justice Anthony M. Kennedy said the federal court sanctions do not have to be paid by the Christic Institute, a church-funded group, and the two journalists, Tony Avirgan and Martha Honey, until the full court acts on their formal appeal.

There is no set date for that action, but it could come as soon as Jan. 13, when the court ends a four-week recess.

Avirgan and Honey, who are married and cover Central America for various news agencies from their base in Costa Rica, were among about 30 journalists who attended a news conference May 30, 1984, in La Penca, Nicaragua, held by contra rebel leader Eden Pastora.

A bomb exploded during the news conference, killing eight people and seriously injuring others.

Daniel Sheehan, chief counsel of the Christic Institute, sued numerous defendants in 1986 on behalf of Avirgan and Honey. The lawsuit, filed in federal court in Miami, alleged that the defendants had joined in an assassination plot aimed at Pastora.

The suit also alleged that the defendants threatened Avirgan and Honey with injury and murder during their investigation of the bombing, forcing them to flee Costa Rica twice.

U.S. District Judge James L. King in Miami dismissed the suit and ordered the Christic Institute, Sheehan, Avirgan and Honey to pay the defendants \$1.05 million for costs and legal fees they incurred.

The 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the sanctions in June, ruling that the suit had been pursued in bad faith.