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Guatemala: Gerardi trial -- justice is possible

Today's ruling by the Guatemalan judiciary sentencing four people to 30 years in prison for the 1998 murder of Bishop Juan José Gerardi gives an encouraging signal that justice can be obtained through the Guatemalan courts, Amnesty International said today.

"This is a day of hope for Guatemala," the organization continued. "Despite the many delays and the attacks, threats and intimidation suffered by judges and witnesses involved in the case, this ruling shows that impunity need not necessarily prevail."

"It is now of vital importance that the Guatemalan judiciary demonstrates that the Gerardi case is not an exception and that those responsible for the thousands of human rights violations committed in the past will be held accountable."

Amnesty International actively supports all initiatives aimed at combatting impunity in the country, most recently the legal suit launched by local human rights group CALDH (Centro de Acción Legal en Derechos Humanos) against officials of the military government of General Ríos Montt for the massacre of over 1,200 indigenous people.

"Impunity is a long-standing stumbling block preventing Guatemala from finally moving away from the atrocities of the civil conflict and towards a true and lasting peace," Amnesty International said.

Background

Military officers Byron Miguel Lima Oliva and Byron Disrael Lima Estrada, former officer José Obdulio Villanueva, and Catholic priest Mario

Orante Nájera were sentenced today for planning the murder of Bishop Gerardi.

Seventy-five-year-old Bishop Gerardi was battered to death on 26 April 1998 in front of his home two days after he had presided over the presentation of the Guatemalan church's report on army-led atrocities committed during the country's long-term civil conflict. Bishop Gerardi was an internationally renowned figure, and the highest ranking Guatemalan church figure to fall victim to a political killing.

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