

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEATURE

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El Salvador: Killed in cold blood on the banks of the river at El Calabozo

1982 was a dangerous time in El Salvador.

The civil war had begun two years earlier, and in rebel-held areas, the national army saw everyone - peasant farmers, babies, women and the elderly - as legitimate military targets.

By 1982 the armed forces had already committed a string of massacres across the country.

In August that year, the Salvadoran armed forces launched a major offensive across the northern San Vicente region – an area considered by the military as a guerrilla stronghold. As news of the offensive spread, communities in San Vicente began to flee in fear for their lives. Many of those who stayed on to tend the crops were the elderly, women and young children.

They had stayed thinking they would be safe at home.

No-one could imagine what was about to come.

Operation 'scorched earth'

After several days and nights of bombing raids, villagers heard rumours that the military were sending in ground troops to finish the job. Thousands of those still left in the area fled their homes, carrying their children and the small amount of food they could manage, as the wave of destruction surged forwards.

"The armed forces called the operation 'scorched earth', because they wanted to finish everything: people, animals – the cows that they saw, they killed. Horses, chickens, dogs, cats – they left the people with nothing. They burned the houses, they burned everything," recalled Felicita, one of the survivors, when she met an Amnesty International researcher earlier this year.

Struggling through dense undergrowth in the midst of a heavy storm, in single file and carrying those less able to walk, families tried to escape the onslaught of the highly trained and heavily equipped professional armed forces.

On the evening of 21 August, a group of several hundred men, women and children had finally made it to the banks of the heavily swollen Amatitán River, at the point known as El Calabozo. They planned to move on again in the morning when the children had been able to rest.

At daybreak, however, they found that the army had arrived.

"The soldiers were up above and below the place, they were already close, so the people couldn't get away, so they started to close in on them. They didn't make them scared that they were going to kill them, they just said they were going to have them gather together, and asked the people to form a line....The people shouted not to kill them because of the children. But...the officer in charge gave the order that they had to shoot them, and so then there were the wails of the poor people," said Felicita, who had managed to hide in the undergrowth with one of her children a distance away.

Surviving the horror

The number of people killed that day is difficult to confirm. The soldiers, from the US-trained Atlacatl Battalion, reportedly threw acid on some of the bodies, and the river swept many of the dead away.

But survivors and relatives have compiled a list of more than 200 missing people, from babies who had not yet even taken their first steps, to elderly grandparents.

Three decades on, the loss of her family still haunts Jesús.

Her mother, father, brother and four-year-old son were among those killed in cold blood on the banks of Amatitán River.

“I didn’t realise that I cried through the night, but they say I cried...it took me years, years, to start to come to terms with it. Because I walked along the street crying, I used to eat, crying, I used to have my supper, crying, at every mealtime, crying,” she said.

It would take nearly 10 years for survivors and those who had fled to return to their villages. In 1992, some of them filed a case with the authorities, asking them to investigate the crimes and bring those responsible to justice.

The case was closed in 1993, despite the evidence and the fact that the UN Truth Commission established after the conflict had also documented the massacre.

Since then, survivors, relatives and the NGO accompanying them have struggled for the case to be heard. Each time it has been re-opened, it has faced a new legal obstacle. The case was last re-opened in 2006, but has still not progressed to a trial, 30 years after the massacre itself took place.

30 years and no answers

In El Salvador, the past is still very present. Individuals accused of being involved in massacres like El Calabozo still hold influential positions, and cases stagnate for decades in a justice system that has repeatedly let the victims down.

Almost none of those who ordered and carried out the killings, torture and sexual violence during the conflict, which left an estimated 75,000 people dead, have ever had to answer for their crimes.

“The survivors and relatives of those murdered at El Calabozo re-live the pain of that day over and over, as if it was yesterday,” said Esther Major, Amnesty International’s researcher on El Salvador, who met with relatives earlier this year.

“The Salvadoran authorities have compounded their grief and trauma by failing to bring to justice any of those who ordered or carried out the massacre. After 30 years it is time to end this travesty by finally providing reparation to survivors and relatives, and prosecuting those responsible for this terrible crime.”

The survivors and relatives of El Calabozo can’t afford to wait any longer. “Some of the people have already died of old age,” said their lawyer, Claudia Interiano, “It seems as if they’re waiting for the survivors of the massacres to die so the problem goes away”.

Carolina Constanza, director of the Madeleine Lagadec Centre for Human Rights, which accompanies the survivors, said: “The relatives and the communities are crying out for justice and truth. We who accompany them are asking the state to recognize the truth, and search for a way to give the victims reparation”

In what was seen as a positive step, the government of El Salvador recently finally recognized state responsibility for another massacre – soldiers killed more than 750 people at El Mozote in 1981 – and started a programme of reparations to that community.

But to date there has not even been an official acknowledgement of the El Calabozo massacre and the devastation it brought.

Today, as survivors and relatives like Jesús and Felicita gather by the Amatitán River to mark another year of justice denied, they are as determined as ever to see the people who ordered and carried out the massacre of their relatives and friends held to account. It is time for 30 years of injustice to end, and for the Salvadoran authorities to answer their calls for truth, justice and reparation.