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Guatemala: Ruling on former president, positive step for justice

Yesterday's ruling that General Efraín Ríos Montt and his former head of military intelligence, General José Mauricio Rodríguez Sánchez, should stand trial for the massacre of almost two thousand people in the 1980s is a crucial step towards justice, truth and reparation, Amnesty International said today.

Ríos Montt, who held power from March 1982 to August 1983, and Rodríguez Sánchez will be tried for their alleged responsibility over the deaths of the mainly Mayan villagers in a series of massacres during that period.

"This decision strengthens justice in Guatemala, as accountability for past crimes begins to emerge" said Sebastian Elgueta, Amnesty International researcher on Central America.

"What is important is to ensure justice, truth and reparation for the families and victims of thousand of other human rights violations.

A 1999 UN-backed truth commission found that during Guatemala's 36-year internal armed conflict (1960-1996) some 200,000 people were killed or disappeared.

After documenting more than 600 massacres, the commission concluded that genocide had occurred – mostly during the Ríos Montt Presidency. Most of those responsible for these crimes have so far evaded justice.

Barriers to effective investigations and prosecutions include the fact that the Guatemalan military continues to refuse to hand over documents and past records which could lead to further prosecutions.

A bill to create a National Commission to Search for Victims of Enforced and Other Forms of Disappearance was presented in 2007, but after six years Congress has failed to pass it into law.

"Today's decision to proceed with the trial is very important – but the crimes of Guatemala's past will continue to cast a shadow over the present until the authorities ensure truth, justice and reparation for all of the victims and their families" said Elgueta.