

# £GUATEMALA

## @Victims of 1982 army massacre at Las Dos Erres exhumed

*"I still dream about the people there. They say that their spirits are not at rest. They say that they see ... Josefina praying where the evangelical chapel used to be. I cannot forget them" (Former resident of Las Dos Erres)*

*"In the well, bones corresponding to at least 162 people were found. Of the 162 people recovered from the well, 67 (41.35%) are those of children younger than 12, with an average age of 7" (Extract from the report by the Argentinian Forensic Anthropology Team)*

*"I looked for them on every mountainside but I couldn't find them" (Father who lost four of his children aged between 9 and 19 in the massacre at Las Dos Erres)*

On 5 December 1982, the Guatemalan army entered the village of Las Dos Erres in Petén Department in the north of Guatemala. By the time they left three days later, it is estimated that more than 350 men, women and children had been massacred. Shortly after, the village was raised to the ground.

The bodies of the dead were reportedly disposed of in seven sites. In July 1994, the Association of Relatives of "Disappeared" Prisoners of Guatemala (*FAMDEGUA, Asociación de Familiares de los Detenidos Desaparecidos de Guatemala*) and the Archbishopric of Guatemala (*Arzobispado de Guatemala*) enlisted the help of the independent Argentinian Forensic Anthropology Team<sup>4</sup> (*EAAF, Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense*) team to excavate a well, one of the sites, and retrieve the remains.

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<sup>1</sup> *"Dicen que sus espíritus no descansan. Dicen que ven a doña Josefina orando donde estaba la capilla evangélica. No los puedo olvidar"*

<sup>2</sup> *"De los 162 esqueletos recuperados dentro del pozo, 67 (41.35%) corresponden a niños menores de 12 años, con una edad promedio de siete años"*

<sup>3</sup> *"Yo los busqué en todas las montañas pero no los pude encontrar"*

<sup>4</sup> The Argentinian Forensic Anthropology Team was formed in 1984 to investigate the "disappeared" in Argentina. They later travelled to many other parts of the world, including Guatemala, to assist in human rights forensic work.

The forensic anthropologists spent 16 days at the site and recovered the remains of 10 people. They returned at the beginning of May 1995 and by the end of July had completed their work at three sites.<sup>5</sup>

In all, the team recovered the remains of at least 162 people. Of these, 67 were children under the age of 12, the average age being 7 years old. In addition to the children, the forensic anthropologists recovered the remains of 24 females and 64 males. The remains showed signs of multiple fractures as a result of being thrown into the well. In at least two cases, plastic cord was found tied around the hands and feet of the victims. The ballistic fragments found in some of the skulls corresponded to weapons and cartridge cases of the Galil rifle, one of the types of rifles known to be used by the army. Two of the bodies were positively identified as belonging to Albino Israel González Carías who was 22 years old and Cristóbal Aquino. The remains of another 16 people were identified by their relatives from the clothes and various other articles found with the remains.

On 30 July 1995, the relatives were finally able to lay their loved ones to rest in the cemetery of Las Cruces, the village which Dos Erres once neighboured.

### ***Massacres in the aftermath of the 1982 military coup***

In March 1982, General Efraín Ríos Montt assumed power in a military coup. In the following months, Amnesty International received consistent reports of massive extrajudicial executions taking place around the country in the course of which Guatemalan security services massacred many thousands of rural non-combatants, including entire families, as well as persons suspected of being sympathetic towards the violent or non-violent opposition groups. A report published by Amnesty International in July 1982, *Massive Extrajudicial Executions in Rural Areas under the government of General Efraín Ríos Montt*, AMR 34/34/82, contained a list of more than 50 massacres in which over 2,000 people were reported to have been killed in incidents recorded between March and June of that year.

Vast areas of El Quiché department, Huehuetenango, Chimaltenango and Alta Verapaz were among the target of army operations. The mass killings, the wholesale destruction of villages and crops, instilled terror in the countryside. In El Quiché alone, Amnesty International recorded more than 150 massacres. However, massacres carried out in the more remote areas of the country such as the largely inaccessible jungle region of the department of Petén in the northern-most part of the country were under-reported.

One massacre carried out by the army in the department of Petén that was reported to Amnesty International was one that took place in June 1981 at El Arbolito. It is estimated that more than 50 people died during the attack on El Arbolito and other surrounding villages, many more remained

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<sup>5</sup> Evidence at four other sites was apparently destroyed by the farming methods used by local peasants which involves slash and burn agriculture, although it is also possible that the bodies were initially burned by the army to destroy evidence as they did after carrying out numerous other massacres in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

"disappeared" and approximately 3,500 people fled the counter-insurgency operations in that area of Guatemala to seek refuge in Mexico. Survivors of the El Arbolito massacre testified to having been bound and tied from 17 to 24 June during which time they were given no food or drink and were beaten and kicked, burnt with cigarettes, subjected to mock executions and near garotting and hooded with rubber hoods impregnated with chemicals. In other cases, rubber 'gloves' were placed over the hands, testicles, throats and breasts of some of the captives and set alight in some cases burning down to the bone before they eventually burnt themselves out. Those who survived believed that others from their village had been similarly tortured and were certain that some of their relatives and friends had died as a result. They had heard trucks drive away with bodies which they supposed were then thrown into the Usumacinta River nearby.

Among the other massacres known to have been carried out by the army in Petén in 1982 was that of Josefinos. According to survivors, in mid-April 1982, the army entered at night with tanks, bombarding the village and burning the houses. The inhabitants woke up and ran from their houses half asleep. The soldiers shot at them. They then reportedly entered the houses, took hold of the children and dashed them against the beams of the houses killing them. Teenage girls were reportedly raped. It is estimated that at least 100 people were killed. Massacres also reportedly occurred in the hamlets of Palestina on 29 April 1982 and Macanché, La Reforma, Flores between 22 April and the end of that month. One source states, that at least 100 people died in Palestina, while reports indicate that more than 30 people may have been killed in various incidents in Macanché.

### ***The massacre at Las Dos Erres -***

*"You are still feeling sad about your little girls. Let's tell Santa Claus to bring you some more"<sup>6</sup> (the lieutenant in charge of the unit that allegedly carried out the massacre at Dos Erres to the mother of two little girls aged four and six killed in the incident)*

The settlement at Las Dos Erres was founded in 1978 by two peasants, Federico Aquino Ruano and Marcos Reyes (the name, Dos Erres, was taken from the initials of the men's surnames) in the municipality of La Libertad in the western part of Petén. They were part of a movement of peasants in the 1960s and 1970s who migrated to Petén in search of land. The inhabitants, some 60 families, most of them originally from the department of Suchitepéquez, lived together harmoniously. A number of day labourers worked in the fields around the village. The villagers built a school and two churches - one evangelical, the other Catholic. More than thirty children attended the school, many of them very young.

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<sup>6</sup> *"Todavía estás triste por tus niñas. Le vamos a decir a Santa Claus que te traiga otras".*

Workers excavating the area around the well in order to exhume the bodies. They finally dug to a depth of over 12 metres and exhumed the remains of at least 162 people.

At the beginning of the 1980s, local inhabitants became aware that people in the area were being abducted by unidentified men travelling in unmarked vehicles. A few days later, their bodies would appear by the side of the road. At the start of 1982, the armed opposition reportedly descended on the nearby hamlet of Las Cruces, held a meeting and bought some goods. Not long

after, the army installed a barracks in Las Cruces under the command of a lieutenant whose name has been made publicly known by the Guatemalan press. The inhabitants of Las Dos Erres had seen planes flying low over the land and had heard the sound of gunfire in the distance but it was after the army massacre at Josefinos that the community began to feel afraid. Rumours spread that Las Dos Erres was going to be bombed.

Around that time, the army began visiting the village every two months. In June 1982, soldiers confiscated the weapons the people in Las Dos Erres used for hunting on the pretext that the armed opposition might take them from the villagers and kill them. The lieutenant in command of the base formed a civil defence patrol (*patrulla de defensa civil, PAC*)<sup>7</sup> in Las Cruces and tried to do the same in Las Dos Erres but the villagers refused to participate.

<sup>7</sup> The Civil Defence Patrols are civilian auxiliaries of the army. They were compulsory under previous military governments but are now ostensibly voluntary. They have been accused of carrying out numerous human rights violations including "disappearances", extrajudicial executions, torture and harassment. Those who have refused to participate in the patrols have themselves been subjected to human rights violations.

Shortly before the massacre, a youth arrived at the settlement, warning the inhabitants to leave the place as the army was going to bomb the area to remove the armed opposition. The youth reportedly told one of the families that he had been given the information by the lieutenant in charge of the barracks at Las Cruces. Some of the families left Las Dos Erres but returned after the lieutenant refuted the information they had received from the youth.

On the night of 5 December 1982, troops went to Las Dos Erres, reportedly disguised as members of the armed opposition. They rounded up the villagers, separating the men and women. The men were put into the schoolhouse, the women in the church. People who escaped reported hearing gunfire and the sound of people crying. Children were heard crying for food and water. The men and women were beaten before being taken away and shot. Some allegedly had their throats slit. Several young girls were raped. A local inhabitant reported that a soldier recounted to him what had happened, *"He told me about his participation in the massacre where they had raped about 14 young girls. He said to me, 'afterwards we clubbed the children on the back of the head and threw them down the well'."*<sup>8</sup>

Villagers who tried to reach Dos Erres were unable to do so as routes to the village had been blocked. One survivor who lost two daughters went to the barracks at Las Cruces to find out what was happening. The lieutenant took hold of the person's jaw and reportedly said, *"What is happening there is a purge; now, as the Bible says, those who turn out to be dirty will die and those who are clean will live; the dirty ones in the fire"*.<sup>9</sup> On seeing the same person a few days later, the lieutenant is reported to have said, *"You are still feeling sad about your little girls. Let's tell Santa Claus to bring you some more"*.

When a few villagers were finally able to reach the village a few days later, they found the place deserted. Belongings in the houses had been overturned and slogans suggesting the armed opposition had been involved in the massacre had been daubed on the walls of some of the buildings. They reportedly found the bodies of 23-year-old Santos Cermeño Arana and his son aged between six and eight years old. The father was reportedly clutching his son to his breast. Both had reportedly had their throats slit. At the site of a dry well, the villagers noticed that a layer of earth had been thrown over the top of the well and that there were a few hats strewn around the area.

Villagers who returned to Dos Erres shortly after said they saw the army removing various possessions and livestock belonging to the inhabitants of the village before setting fire to the place. Local inhabitants subsequently reported finding the remains of several people in a lagoon.

### ***Remains of 162 people exhumed***

<sup>8</sup> *"El me contó de su participación en la masacre donde habían violado a unas 14 patojas. El me dijo: después les dimos a los niños con un garrote en la nuca y los tiramos al pozo"*.

<sup>9</sup> *"Lo que está ocurriendo es una limpieza; ahora sí, como dice la Biblia, lo que salga sucio se va a morir y lo que salga limpio va a vivir; lo sucio al fuego"*.

*"During the worst years here there was nobody to turn to. Until about five years ago, we couldn't even go and work. We couldn't get up or speak. We couldn't do anything because they terrified us. You couldn't speak to anyone about anything"<sup>10</sup>. (A peasant living in Las Cruces)*

*"It was a pair of reading glasses that led to his identification. They were the same ones he used for reading the Bible, lit by an oil lamp. They couldn't be mistaken, there weren't any others like them, because, they were so worn out, Estanislao used an elastic band to hold them in place"<sup>11</sup> (from an article from 11 August 1995 edition of *Crónica*, a Guatemalan weekly magazine, as to how it was possible to positively identify the remains of one of the victims exhumed at Dos Erres)*

#### 0 c. FAMDEGUA

Photograph of Cristóbal Aquino. The photo was found in the pocket of his clothes.

In February 1994, FAMDEGUA began to make preparations for the exhumations to take place. A request for the exhumation to be carried out was made before Judge Edgar Rivera González of the Court of First Instance (*Corte de Primera Instancia*) in San Benito, Petén. The investigations were subsequently transferred to the jurisdiction of the Justice of the Peace (*Juzgado de Paz*) at Sayaxché, Petén. Lic. Alfonso Ramírez Ramos, assistant prosecutor (*fiscal auxiliar*) with the Guatemalan Attorney General's Office (*Ministerio Público*, responsible for pursuing inquiries into all reported crimes and human rights violations) was assigned to the case.

On 4 July 1994, three members of the Argentinian team of forensic anthropologists began work at a dry well, one of seven sites where victims of the massacre were known to have been buried. They worked for 16 days and exhumed the remains of 10 people, all of whom bore gunshot wounds. The start of the rainy season and the technical complexities involved in exhuming the bodies lead to a decision to defer work at the site until the following year. They returned on 2 May 1995 and continued working at the first site as well as two other sites; the former a lagoon "*La Aguada*", the latter known as "*Los Salazares*".

<sup>10</sup> *"Durante los peores años aquí no hubo nadie a quien acudir. Hasta hace cinco años no podíamos ir ni a trabajar. No nos podíamos ni levantar ni hablar. No se podía hacer nada porque nos tenían atemorizados. No podía hablar nada con nadie".*

<sup>11</sup> *"fue un par de lentes lo que permitió establecer su identidad. Eran los mismos que utilizaban para leer la 'Biblia', alumbrados por un candil. No podían confundirse, no había otros lentes iguales, porque, de tan gastados que estaban, don Estanislao los sostenía con un hule en lugar de patillas".*

0 Clothing belonging to children killed in the massacre.

At the first site, the team found the bones of at least 162 people.<sup>12</sup> Of these, 67 were children younger than 12, with an average age of 7. The team was able to recover a number of items such as money, a calendar and an identity card that allowed them to conclude that the remains could not have been there prior to 1982. Many of the remains showed signs of

multiple fractures as a result of having been thrown in the well. Fractures were also due to the bodies being crushed together. Most of the victims were dressed at the time they were killed and the forensic team found articles of clothing. In at least two cases, plastic cords were found tied around the hands and feet. They found bullet holes in some of the skulls. All the ballistic evidence they uncovered was consistent with Galil rifles having been used, a weapon which Israel has been providing to Guatemala for many years and one which is in fact frequently used by the Guatemalan armed forces

All the bones and items of clothing located at the second site, *La Aguada*, were incomplete. Most were in a bad state of deterioration as a result of fire. The forensic team concluded that the bones corresponded to at least four individuals. Similarly at the third site, *Los Salazares*, the bones had seriously deteriorated as a result of fire, the level of acidity of the ground and damage caused by the vegetation in the area. The team found a calendar for the year 1982 and concluded that the remains corresponded to at least five people. In some of the bone fragments they found injuries produced by bullets.

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<sup>12</sup>The team stated in their report that the number of victims in the well could have been higher but various factors, including damage to the remains caused by pre- and post-mortem trauma as well as the extreme fragmentation of the large number of bones belonging to children, meant that it was not possible to determine.

People involved in the exhumations were the subject of repeated death threats. In December 1994, FAMDEGUA reported that death threats had been received by local inhabitants including relatives of people killed during the massacre at Las Dos Erres and local clergy. The threats were said to have been issued by a military commissioner (*comisionado militar*, a civilian agent of the army, serving under military command<sup>13</sup>) who is reported to have said that he had a list of all the people in the village of Las Cruces who had been involved in the exhumations and who would be killed if they carried on with their work. When the work first started in 1994, there were reports of an increased military presence in the zone, believed to be an attempt to intimidate people involved in the exhumations. Police protection was given to the members of FAMDEGUA and the forensic team after they reported incidents in which weapons, including machine guns, were fired into the air and stones were thrown at the roof of the place in Las Cruces in which they were staying. At the beginning of July 1995, equipment belonging to the Argentinian forensic team was stolen.

### ***Amnesty International's Concerns***

There are allegedly over one hundred clandestine cemeteries in Guatemala where thousands of non-combatant civilians are believed to be buried. The majority of them indigenous peasants, who were killed or "disappeared" during counterinsurgency operations in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

In the department of Petén, there are thought to be at least 12 clandestine cemeteries. The issue of clandestine cemeteries raises a number of concerns for Amnesty International:

- The extrajudicial execution of thousands of peasants by the Guatemalan armed forces;
- "Disappearance" of thousands of peasants in the late 1970s and early 1980s, carried out by official security force personnel, including the Guatemalan army and the civil defence patrols formed at military behest and acting under military orders;
- Lack of proper investigations into the fate of those found in the graves, and the impunity of those responsible for their deaths;
- Harassment and threats against those who press for exhumations of secret graves and against those judicial officials and doctors who take part in them, as well as against human rights groups who assist or accompany those pressing for exhumations to take place;
- Obstruction by official bodies to petitions for exhumations to be carried out, and/or delays in processing requests for exhumations;
- Improper exhumations conducted by the authorities;

<sup>13</sup> On 14 September, President Ramiro de León Carpio announced the demobilisation of the more than 24,000 military commissioners. Concern has been expressed, however, at the failure of the military high command to disarm the military force who have been accused of committing serious human rights violations.



- The possible destruction of evidence (ie. removal of the bodies from the sites before the exhumation takes place) by the military;
- The fact that if those responsible for the massacre and clandestine burial of thousands of non-combattant civilians are not identified and brought to justice, that the way will be left open for a practice which obviously contributed to the impunity which the perpetrators of the gross abuses of the late 1970s and early 1980s have thus far enjoyed.

None of those responsible for the gross human rights violations during the late 1970s and early 1980s -- the height of the army's counter-insurgency campaign -- have been brought to justice. While there have been an isolated number of cases in recent years where successful prosecutions have been brought against those responsible for abuses, these have mainly been in cases where the victim was a foreign national or of high social status, and where a high-level of national and international attention was maintained.

In March 1994 peace talks brokered by the United Nations resulted in the signing of a human rights accord between the government and the armed opposition under which they agreed to respect and promote human rights. The government also committed itself to take firm action against impunity. In addition, the March agreement set the agenda for reaching agreement on refugees and the displaced, indigenous peoples, a ceasefire, constitutional reforms and finally, in December 1994, a peace treaty. In June 1994, the government and armed opposition agreed on a clarification commission, to look into human rights violations and "acts of violence" that had "caused suffering to the Guatemalan people". The Commission was only to begin operations however, upon the signing of a final accord between the two sides, and would not be empowered to name perpetrators of human rights violations nor initiate legal proceedings against them.

In March 1995, the Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples (*Acuerdo Sobre Identidad y Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas*) was signed. However, while progress has been made in some of the discussion areas, by September 1995, delegates from the government and the armed opposition were reported to have barely touched on several substantive issues and the signing of a definitive peace agreement had been postponed until early 1996.

Amnesty International believes it is essential that the agreement regarding the setting up of a Clarification of Violations of Human Rights and Acts of Violence which Caused Suffering to the Guatemalan People during the Armed Conflict<sup>14</sup> be implemented. The organization further calls on the Guatemalan Government to ensure that all those responsible for the long-term and gross pattern of human rights violations are brought to justice. Amnesty International believes that failure by the authorities to take such steps can lead to a repetition of the same patterns of

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<sup>14</sup>Comisión para el esclarecimiento histórico de las violaciones a los derechos humanos y los hechos de violencia que han causado sufrimientos a la población guatemalteca.

abuses and is convinced of the need for such measures as a clear official signal that human rights violations will not be tolerated under any circumstances.

## ***The Victims***

Here follows a list of some of the victims of the massacre at Las Dos Erres. The names have been compiled from several different lists which contained some inconsistencies and omissions. Where known, the names are divided according to the plots of land occupied by the various families.

### Plot One

Family of Federico Aquino Ruano.

Teodora Miranda (wife)

His children: Rigoberto Aquino, 25 years old, Cristóbal Aquino, 22

Francisco Ceballos

Reina (wife)

Three children -- the eldest aged six

Luis Ceballos, 70

Elodia, 70 (wife)

Andrés Ceballos

María (wife)

Three children - the eldest aged six

### Plot Two

Víctor Corado

Petrona (wife)

Five children - aged 13 down

### Plot Three

Francisco Mayén

Juana Aquino (wife)

Children - Mayro, 7, Juan Carlos, 5, plus two younger

### Plot Four

Fernando García

### Plot Five

Juan Arévalo

His wife

Five children - José, Joel, Abel and two girls - aged 16 down

### Plot Six

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Clorinda Recinos (f)  
Children - Etelvina, 19, Antonio, César, Alfredo

Plot Seven

Abel Granados Sandoval  
Hilda Rodríguez Cardona (wife)  
Children - Adeldo, Midian, Leticia, Irma, Amanda, Carlos Enrique, Magdalena  
Heverildo Granados  
Joaquina Hernández Escobar (wife)  
Children - Joaquín, Ponciano, Alvaro, Magalí and a new-born baby

Plot Eight

José Ramiro Aldana Pérez, 41  
Albina Canaan Hernández, 38 (wife)  
Children - Delia Aracely, 20, Gladys Judith, 15, Rolando, 10, Sandra, 7, Rosita, 5, Ana Maritza,  
1 and 1/2

Plot Nine

Felipe Arriaga  
Children - Luis Alberto, María Carmela, Juan Humberto, Rosa Lorena, Juana Maura, Julio Alfredo,  
José Manuel

Plot Ten

Estanislao Galicia, 42  
Josefa Arriaga, 40 (wife)  
Children - Miguel Angel, 18, Samuel, 15, Blanca Maribel, 12, Raquel, 10, Noé 8 plus two nieces  
who were visiting, Elida Esperanza González Arriaga, 6, Ana Alicia, 4  
Ester Castañeda, wife of Miguel Angel  
Wife of pastor plus about four of their children  
Carlos and Enma Castañeda

Plot Eleven

Vitalino Linares Pernillo  
Evangelina Ruano de Linares (wife)  
Children - Mayén, Mayra, Blanca, Marvin, Lucrecia, Fidelino

Plot Twelve

Serapio García  
María Linares Pernillo (wife)  
Children - Silvia, Magalena  
Israel Castillo

Plot Thirteen

Marcelino Ruano  
Santos Jiménez (wife)  
Children - 2 children aged between 2 and 4 and another daughter reportedly pregnant  
Armando Barahona and Flavio López - worked for Marcelino Ruano

Plot Fourteen

Sotero Cermeño  
Julia de Cermeño (wife)  
Children - Olivia, Santos, Amílcar and partner Maribel Castañeda, Ramiro, Ana, Rosa, Alicia, Antonio

Plot Fifteen

Manuel Ruano  
Maura de Ruano (wife)  
Three young children

Plot Sixteen

Roberto Pineda García  
Juana Linares (wife)  
Children - Leonel, Dora, Adán, Sonia, Evelia, Ana, Marta Rutilia

Plot Seventeen

Sotero Salazar

Children - Irma Coralía, Rolando, René and wife Marina, Arturo Salazar

Other people who perished in the massacre:.

Family of Jerónimo Batres, 40

Elvia Cano, 35, (w) reportedly pregnant at the time

Children-Bernabé, 17, Vilma, 16, Abel, 14, Oralia, 11, Sonia, 8, Elizabeth, 5, Jerónimo, 3

Family of don Félix (surname not known)

Angelita ? (w)

About 7 children

Two other families lived on the same plot

Family of Esteban Romero Peralta

His father - Máximo

Children - Inés, Tomás

About five others

Family of Cecilio Lobos - about eight people

Family of Eulalio Granados Sandoval

Angelina Escobar (w)

About five children

Family of person known as Canuto

About six children

Benedicto Granados Sandoval, 40, and son, Marcelo, 18

Toribio López Ruano, 19

Santos López Ruano 15

Alicia López Ruano, 14

Mariano López Ruano, 9

Próspero Ramírez Peralta

Guadalupe Nelía Ramírez

René Salazar

Victoriano Jiménez Pernillo

Lucía Castillo Pineda

five children, two grandchildren

Juan Mejía Echeverría  
José Antonio Mejía Morales (son)

Roberto Pineda  
Juana Linares Pernillo (wife)

Vitalino Linares Pernillo  
Adelina Ruano  
seven children

0 Bones and clothing belonging to one of the victims of the massacre

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AI Index: AMR 34/24/95

Distr: SC/CO/GR

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**GUATEMALA:  
VICTIMS OF 1982 ARMY MASSACRE AT LAS DOS ERRES EXHUMED**

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Section officers, including press officers may use the enclosed document to respond to any press or other queries about this case. You may also wish to distribute to journalists intending to cover the 12 November presidential elections. If you need Spanish copies of the document, please contact EDAI or the Guatemala team at the IS.

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This document has been sent direct by the IS to Sections, the CASA network and Guatemala coordinators and medical groups. A more detailed set of recommended actions, AMR 34/25/95 has been sent to relevant Sections, the CASA network, Guatemala coordinators and medical groups.