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Former Guatemalan officials must face trial over extrajudicial executions

Former high-ranking Guatemalan officials accused of involvement in the extrajudicial executions of prisoners should face prosecution in fair trials, Amnesty International said after the arrest of former Interior Minister Carlos Vielman in Spain on Wednesday.

Vielman, former National Director of Police Erwin Sperisen, who is currently resident in Switzerland, and other former officials are being investigated over the killings of prisoners held at two prisons in Guatemala in 2005 and 2006.

“These former officials must be returned to Guatemala to face justice or should be brought to trial in their countries of residence, in line with international human rights norms”, said Sebastian Elgueta, Researcher on Central America at Amnesty International.

Carlos Vielman, Erwin Sperisen and others are accused of involvement in extrajudicial executions of inmates, who escaped from El Infiernito prison in October 2005, as well as the extrajudicial executions of prisoners in the El Pavón prison in September 2006, and other crimes.

Seven inmates were killed during Operación Pavo Real (Operation Peacock), which was organised to retake control of El Pavón prison.

The Interior Ministry and the police said at the time that they had been killed during confrontations with the prison authorities. However, a report of the Guatemalan Human Rights Ombudsman’s Office in December 2006 concluded they had been shot and extrajudicially executed.

“It is now time to for those states where these individuals are resident to prove their commitment to international human rights standards” said Sebastian Elgueta.

“Unless such crimes are punished, impunity will prevail in Guatemala” said Sebastian Elgueta.

Background

More than two decades ago in 1989, the UN General Assembly welcomed the adoption of the Principles on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions, which provide that states must ensure that persons suspected of extrajudicial executions must either be tried or extradited.

The charges against the two, and 17 other individuals, some of whom are already in custody, were brought by the Guatemalan Attorney General’s Office, supported by the UN-sponsored International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). Since its creation in 2007, as a result of an agreement between the government of Guatemala and the UN, CICIG has worked with the Attorney General’s Office on a number of high profile cases.

Amnesty International takes no position on whether the suspects are responsible for these crimes and they are entitled to the presumption of innocence until and unless they have been proved guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.