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Guatemala court convicts paramilitaries over 1982 massacre

Five Guatemalan men have each been sentenced to nearly 8,000 years in prison for their role in the massacre of indigenous villagers in 1982 in a ruling hailed by Amnesty International as a victory for the victims.

The men formed part of a military-trained civilian patrol that rounded up and killed 268 Maya-Achí indigenous villagers in Plan de Sánchez near the market town of Rabinal – 100 km north of the capital – in July 1982. The guilty verdict – in a Guatemala City criminal court – is the latest in a series of recent rulings dealing with scores of mass killings and other crimes against humanity in indigenous and rural villages during the country's 36-year internal armed conflict.

“Slowly but surely, justice is beginning to prevail for these horrendous crimes that have hung over Guatemalan society for three decades,” said Sebastian Elgueta, Central America Researcher at Amnesty International.

“Each new verdict erodes the long-entrenched impunity in the country, and the authorities must continue to ensure that the thousands of victims and their relatives are given access to justice and full reparation as well as the truth about what happened.”

The convicted men – Eusebio Grace, Julián and Mario Acoj, Santos Rosales and Lucas Tecú – face jail terms of 7,710 years each for their role in the assault on Plan de Sánchez.

At the time, the five men were members of the Civil Defence Patrols (Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil, PAC), paramilitary units set up by Guatemala's armed forces to carry out tasks as part of what officials described as a “scorched earth” military policy.

Survivors of the attack on Plan de Sánchez – one of the bloodiest in the conflict – told the court how the men raped and tortured scores of villagers before killing them.

Early in the morning of 18 July 1982, two mortar grenades were dropped on Plan de Sánchez as rural peasants were making their way to trade at the market in Rabinal. That afternoon, some 60 people in military uniforms and brandishing assault rifles arrived and began rounding up the village's Maya-Achí indigenous inhabitants.

Around 20 girls between the ages of 12 and 20 were taken to a house where they were abused, raped and murdered. Other children were beaten to death, while some adults were imprisoned in a house before troops fired on them indiscriminately and attacked them with hand-grenades.

Some villagers were forced into straw dwellings that were doused with gasoline and set alight, their bodies later dumped into mass graves.

In addition to the prison sentences – the length of which is symbolic, to reflect the horrendous nature of

the crimes against humanity committed – the court ordered Guatemala’s Ministries of Education and Culture to commission documentaries to honour the victims.

Former high-ranking officers, including the de facto head of state at the time of the massacre, now-retired General José Efraín Ríos Montt, are currently facing genocide charges.

This Friday will mark 30 years since Ríos Montt took control of Guatemala in a coup d’etat in 1982, staying in power until August 1983, when he too was deposed in a coup. Half of all the documented human rights violations of Guatemala’s internal armed conflict took place those years.

A UN-backed truth commission released in 1999 found that during Guatemala’s 36-year internal armed conflict some 200,000 people were killed or disappeared and security forces committed more than 600 mass killings, mainly in rural and indigenous communities.

Amnesty International continues to call for an end to impunity for all those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during this period.

“We continue to call on Guatemalan authorities to investigate and hold officials accountable up the entire chain of command for their role in the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during Guatemala’s civil war,” said Sebastian Elgueta.

“Justice, truth and reparation are essential to send a message that such widespread human rights violations must never again take place.”