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Expert witnesses receive death threats after Guatemala massacre trial

Four staff members of a forensic anthropology team in Guatemala have received death threats after testifying at a recent high-profile trial over a 1982 army massacre that left 250 villagers dead.

Freddy Peccerelli, the founder of the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation, received a hand-written death threat in Guatemala City on 8 August. The note also mentioned his colleagues José Samuel Suasnavar, Leonel Estuardo Paiz and Omar Bertoni, all of whom gave testimony at the trial.

The threat came after a judge in Guatemala City sentenced four former soldiers from an elite army unit to 6,060 years in prison on 2 August for their role in a 1982 massacre in Dos Erres village in Guatemala's northern Petén region.

"It is unacceptable for expert witnesses to be intimidated like this, and Guatemalan authorities must order an independent, thorough and impartial investigation into these threats and bring those responsible to justice," said Sebastian Elgueta, Amnesty International's Central America Researcher.

"Guatemalans have waited nearly three decades for justice in the case of the Dos Erres massacre and hundreds of other grave human rights violations, and the failure to stop such death threats would cast a pall over the judicial process."

The soldiers sentenced in the recent trial were part of an elite "kaibil" unit that entered Dos Erres on 5 December 1982, where they tortured and killed some 250 men, women and children over the course of three days before razing the village. Many of the women and girls were raped, and numerous villagers, including children, were thrown into the village well.

Guatemala's Public Prosecutor's office had called on the forensic experts to testify at the trial based on their work to exhume and analyse the victims of the massacre.

Peccerelli told Amnesty International that he received a hand-written note in red ink that said: "Sons of a bitch. You will pay us slowly, for each of the 6050 years that our people are going to suffer because of you, now we won't simply watch you we will leave you battered like the rest".

The note went on to say that, "when you least expect it you will die. Revolutionaries your DNA will be of no use. Your families will pay, you will follow suit."

"Guatemala has an appalling track record of impunity, and allowing these latest threats to go unpunished will simply entrench that further," said Sebastian Elgueta.

"The authorities should consult with staff members of the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation to ensure that full and appropriate protection is provided for them and their families, and must ensure that

expert witnesses are not put at risk in future.”