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Guatemalan former soldiers sentenced to 6,060 years for massacre

A judge in Guatemala City yesterday sentenced four former soldiers from an elite army unit to more than 6,000 years in prison for their role in a 1982 massacre in Dos Erres village in the north of the country.

“This landmark sentence sends a message that Guatemala might finally be moving closer to delivering justice to the hundreds of thousands of victims of grave human rights violations during the civil war,” said Sebastian Elgueta, Central America Researcher at Amnesty International.

“The Dos Erres massacre in 1982 was a particularly brutal incident, but this is just the tip of the iceberg and numerous crimes against humanity and other grave violations have yet to be resolved in Guatemala, including some cases that have yet to be opened.”

A Guatemalan elite army unit entered Dos Erres in the northern Petén region on 5 December 1982 and 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.

The former soldiers – Manuel Pop Sun, Reyes Collin Gualip, Daniel Martínez and Lieutenant Carlos Carías – have been sentenced to 30-year prison terms for each murder and an additional 30 years for committing a crime against humanity. The ruling is largely symbolic as under Guatemalan law they can serve a maximum of 50 years.

A UN-backed truth commission 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 massacres, mainly in rural and indigenous communities.

An investigation into the Dos Erres massacre was opened in 1994, but dozens of appeals filed by the defence caused the case to languish in courts for years.

Survivors of the massacre testified at the trial, and previously told Amnesty International that an official at a local military base had ordered the operation to cover up the rape of a village woman by a military officer.

The former soldiers continue to maintain their innocence.

“Although this ruling is a step forward in the fight against impunity in Guatemala, soldiers did not commit these crimes on their own initiative, and the authorities must bring to justice those all the way up the chain of command who planned and ordered the crimes,” said Sebastian Elgueta.

Over the past year, another former soldier who took part in the Dos Erres massacre was arrested in the USA. Gilberto Jordán confessed to US authorities that he took part in the massacre, including by throwing a baby into the village well. He is due to be deported back to Guatemala after completing a 10-

year sentence there for immigration violations.

In other developments, Guatemalan authorities arrested former general Héctor Mario López Fuentes in June. He is accused of planning and ordering genocide and other crimes against humanity committed against Maya indigenous communities in 1982-1983.

Another trial is under way in a Spanish court against Guatemala's former President Efraín Ríos Montt for genocide and other grave abuses committed as part of a "scorched earth" policy aimed at combating the armed opposition group.