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Guatemala: Former police chief convicted in 1980s disappearance case

A Guatemalan court has sentenced an ex-police chief to 70 years in prison for the 1981 disappearance and torture of a university student, in what Amnesty International says is a strong message that even after three decades justice can be delivered.

On Tuesday a court in Guatemala City found Pedro García Arredondo, former chief detective of the now-defunct National Police (Policía Nacional, PN), guilty of ordering the enforced disappearance of agronomy student Édgar Enrique Sáenz Calito during the country's long-running internal armed conflict.

The disappearance is a crime under international law, and the court found that the victim's torture in detention amounted to a crime against humanity.

"It has taken more than three decades for justice to catch up to Pedro García Arredondo, but this ruling sends another strong message that those responsible for past human rights violations in Guatemala will be held accountable," said Sebastian Elgueta, Researcher on Central America at Amnesty International.

García Arredondo's trial covered in detail how he "planned, cooperated with and aided in" Sáenz Calito's disappearance – and the judgment found that he "had full authority and as a consequence, knowledge of what happened to the disappeared person".

On 4 March 1981, officials from the PN's Sixth Command arrested the agronomy student on suspicion of undermining national security after he was found carrying literature from an armed resistance group, the Revolutionary Organization of Armed People (Organización Revolucionario del Pueblo en Armas).

Witnesses testified how Sáenz Calito was taken to "the little room" ("el cuartito") where the Sixth Command typically interrogated guerrilla suspects.

The victim's wife Violeta Ramírez Estrada told the court how she visited her husband in a prison hospital following his arrest and he bore signs of having been tortured – he had been subjected to beatings, water-boarding and cigarette burns, and electric shocks had been applied to his genitals.

He was later released on 9 June 1981 due to a lack of evidence against him, but just minutes after he left the Sixth Command building, four armed men in plainclothes pulled him into a vehicle and drove off.

Violeta Ramírez explained how ongoing harassment by the authorities after her husband's disappearance caused her to go into exile with their daughter.

"Édgar Enrique Sáenz Calito and his family suffered a terrible ordeal at the hands of Guatemala's security forces, but justice has been finally delivered. This ruling will give hope to the tens of thousands of other victims and relatives of victims that they, too, will see their tormentors held accountable for the

horrendous abuses that took place during Guatemala's civil war," said Elgueta.

The release of police archives from the 1980s aided in the investigation and prosecution of García Arredondo.

Amnesty International is calling for the disclosure of military archives from the same time period, which could help to resolve many others cases of human rights violations and bring those responsible to justice.

During the course of Guatemala's 36-year internal armed conflict that began in 1960, an estimated 200,000 people were killed – including approximately 45,000 who were disappeared and tortured.

A peace agreement signed in 1996 brought an end to the conflict but it was not until 2008 that the country's first trial in a disappearance case opened.

Guatemala's Congress introduced a bill in 2007 to form a National Search Committee that would help with the crucial investigation work into cases of enforced disappearances. Amnesty International calls on the Congress of Guatemala to move this bill forward.

Several other recent high-profile trials in Guatemala have seen former soldiers and retired military officers put on trial and – in some cases – convicted for crimes against humanity.

Among these is the prosecution of former military ruler José Efraín Ríos Montt for genocide of Mayan villagers.

"The ongoing efforts to prosecute those responsible for human rights violations during the course of Guatemala's internal armed conflict must move forward," said Elgueta.