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Bolivia: Former officials convicted over massacre

The conviction of seven high-ranking former officials in Bolivia for their role in dozens of deaths during anti-government protests in 2003 is an important step for justice, Amnesty International said today.

Bolivia's Supreme Court in Sucre yesterday sentenced five former senior military officers and two former ministers for their part in the events known as "Black October," which left 67 people dead and more than 400 injured during protests in El Alto, near La Paz, in late 2003.

The clashes included soldiers opening fire on unarmed crowds during demonstrations sparked by opposition to a proposed pipeline to export natural gas through neighbouring Chile.

"These convictions are an important victory for the families of those killed and injured who have waited nearly eight years to see justice delivered after the tragic events known as 'Black October,'" said Guadalupe Marengo, Deputy Americas Programme Director at Amnesty International.

The five military officers have received prison sentences ranging from 10 to 15 years, while the two former ministers were sentenced to three years.

Former President Gonzálo Sánchez de Lozada and former ministers Carlos Sánchez Berzaín and Jorge Berindoague fled to the USA soon after the "Black October" violence and are facing extradition. Several other former ministers and military officers fled the country when the charges were made public in November 2008.

Serious obstacles hindered the case, including the failure of the military to hand over relevant information and a lack of sufficient resources to allow many witnesses and victims to attend court in Sucre, a long way from El Alto.

"We hope that this ruling sets a positive precedent for the pursuit of lasting and impartial justice in other human rights cases in Bolivia," said Guadalupe Marengo.