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## **Suriname: Families of Bouterse's victims seek justice 30 years on**

President Bouterse must not be allowed to walk away from his responsibility in the torture and death of 15 people in Suriname in December 1982, Amnesty International said today, ahead of the 30th anniversary of the killings.

Last April, Suriname's National Assembly passed an amendment to extend an Amnesty Law that has virtually brought the trial against President Desiré Delano Bouterse, who led a military regime between 1980 and 1982, to a halt.

In May, the military court in charge of the case adjourned the trial in order for there to be a review of the new law's constitutionality, which was to be carried out by the Attorney General's Office.

Legal experts have argued that such a review can only be undertaken by a constitutional court. However, the constitutional court provided for in the 1987 Surinamese constitution has never in fact been established. Media reports have recently indicated that the military court will now reconvene on 12 December.

"The continuing lack of justice for the relatives of Bouterse's victims and the installment of an amnesty law to underpin that lack of justice is simply shameful, said Javier Zúñiga, special advisor at Amnesty International.

"The fact that 30 years on from those terrible crimes, no one has brought to justice puts Suriname in a completely different chapter from its neighbours in Latin America, who have made steady progress when it comes to bringing justice to the victims of their dark past."

### **The murders**

In the early morning of the 8th of December 1982, 16 men were arrested in their houses in Paramaribo and taken to Fort Zeelandia, a former Dutch fort that served as Bouterse's headquarters.

The men were journalists, lawyers, professors, businessmen, soldiers and labour union leaders.

During the arrests, violence was used in some cases and the homes of some of the detainees were vandalized.

According to eye-witnesses, the men were barely given the opportunity to put clothes on, and their families had to stay inside their homes for several hours, guarded by one or several soldiers.

On the morning of the 9th December, bodies were delivered at the mortuary of the local hospital. As soon as this became publicly known, hundreds of people gathered there, creating a tensed atmosphere. The military shoot in the air.

A government statement was issued on TV, claiming that the 15 men had been shot because they had

tried to escape. The only survivor of the killing, union leader Fred Derby, was allowed to leave the fort after he was questioned by Bouterse.

The Netherlands condemned the murders strongly and immediately suspended all financial aid to Suriname. It announced that the matter would be brought to the UN Commission on Human Rights. The Dutch Jurist's Committee for Human Rights started an investigation and released a report in February 1983.

In this report, the Committee stated that all bodies of the victims showed signs of torture and had several bullet holes, particularly in the head, face, chest and abdomen. Teeth were beaten in, bones broken, and tongues were cut out.

### **8th of December trial**

The Fort Zeelandia killings were never properly investigated but in November 2007, a trial against him and 24 other suspects, including several ministers, began.

At the time, Bouterse said the trial was 'political' and refused to be present. He apologized for the murders, and said he was not present at the fort at the time the murders were committed.

The trial has now been suspended, while the Attorney General's Office finds out whether the amnesty law recently passed is contradictory to the Constitution. There has been a recent announcement that the military court will reconvene on 12 December.

The amendment to the 1992 Amnesty Law widened the existing period of amnesty for past criminal offences linked to the defence of the state from 1985-1989 to April 1980 until August 1992, thus covering the killings of Fort Zeelandia.

Amnesties for gross human rights violations, including extrajudicial executions, contravene international law and also deny redress to the relatives of victims.

President Bouterse has argued that the new amnesty law would help to reconcile the country.

"Reconciliation is not possible without justice, truth, and reparation. The Amnesty Law has no place in Suriname today. What we urgently need to see is justice for the victims and their relatives," said Javier Zúñiga.