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Weston man sued under U.S. Torture Victim Protection Act for his role in the notorious 1985 siege of Colombia's Palace of Justice

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The Colombian army outside the Palace of Justice watch as a tank forces its way through the entrance. Photo: The Bogotá Post

By Dan Christensen, FloridaBulldog.org

A retired Lt. Colonel in the Colombian army now living in Weston, who spent nearly eight years in prison for his role in the deadly 1985 siege by M-19 guerillas at Bogotá's Palace of Justice, has been sued under the U.S. Torture Victim Protection Act.

Three daughters of Magistrate Carlos Horacio Uran Rojas, who was among more than 100 civilians who died in the attack that claimed the lives of 11 Supreme Court justices and 11 cafeteria workers, filed the lawsuit Tuesday in Fort Lauderdale U.S. District Court against Luis Alfonso Plazas Vega. A jury trial was sought seeking unspecified damages.

News video showed Magistrate Uran Rojas, with an injury to his leg, leaving the building in the custody of the military shortly after siege ended. "His brutalized body" was found inside the Palace of Justice later the same day "stripped naked and washed, with a close-range gunshot wound to the temple," the 20-page complaint says.



The 1992 Torture Victim Protection Act grants U.S. citizens and non-citizens the right to bring complaints

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Former Colombian army Lt. Col. Luis Alfonso Plazas Vega in 2016 Photo: Ciudad Weston Newspaper

seeking monetary damages for torture and extrajudicial killings committed in foreign countries. Lawsuits can be filed against individuals acting in an official capacity, but only after the plaintiffs have unsuccessfully

sought to find redress in the country where the crime was committed.

The siege at the Palace of Justice began the morning of Nov. 6, 1985, when 35 M-19 armed guerillas entered through the four-story building's basement parking lot and quickly took about 300 hostages. The commanding general, who also eventually went to prison, put Plazas Vega, the head of a brigade that specialized in armored fighting vehicles, in command of the military's operation to retake the Palace of Justice, according to the complaint.

In about two hours, armored tanks breached the building and soldiers began "clearing guerrillas by force" and escorting civilians out until a large fire broke out and forced a retreat until the next morning when operations resumed. The fighting lasted until late afternoon on Nov. 7, the complaint says. All but one of the M-19 guerillas were killed in the attack.

'AN UNLAWFUL SYSTEM'

"As part of its retaking of the Palace of Justice, the military deployed an unlawful system designed to identify, interrogate, forcibly disappear, torture and, often, extrajudicially kill any suspected guerillas or guerrilla sympathizers among the hostages," the complaint says. "Following their deaths, the military then denied ever having these individuals in their custody."

That system, documented in military and police logbooks and internal radio communications, included segregating persons dubbed "especiales," or special, who were then violently interrogated before being taken to a military facility, including one headed by Plazas Vega.

"A fortunate few" who managed to escape by convincing the military they were not involved with the guerillas, or had their own connections to higher-ups, "lived to provide first-hand accounts of the especiales system," the complaint says.

"The military attempted to cover up its crimes by disposing of the remains of their victims. Some of the disappeared have never been found. In a few instances, the military returned the bodies to the Palace of Justice and claimed they had died in crossfire during the siege," the complaint says.

That bogus "crossfire" story is what Uran Rojas's daughters allege the military told their family about how their father died.

Uran Rojas's eldest daughter is Helena Uran Bidegain, who as personal representative of her father's estate is the lead plaintiff. She was 10 when her father was killed and is today a German citizen



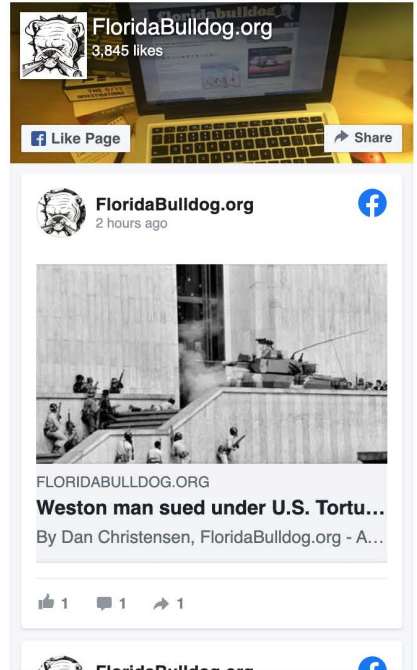
Helena Uran Bidegain and the cover of a 2020 book she wrote about her father's murder.

living at an unspecified location in the United States. Mairee Uran Bidegain, who was 5 at the time of her father's death, is a French citizen who resides in Chile. Ximomara Uran is a U.S. citizen who lives in the U.S. She was a year old when her father died.

PLAZAS VEGA ROLE

The complaint details the role of Plazas Vega role in the retaking of the Palace of Justice and the unlawful 'especiales' system, including his ordering of the transfer of the especiales to military facilities where he "reprimanded" guards for being too lenient with them.

Further, the complaint lays out the military cover-up that ensued: How the few especiales who were released were "told to keep quiet and threatened" with further harm if they told anyone



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about the torture they'd suffered; how family members, journalists and lawyers who sought information about those who had been killed or disappeared were intimidated; how the crime scene at the Palace of Justice was mishandled and evidence was concealed.

But a sustained campaign by the loved ones of the dead and missing ultimately led in 2007 to a criminal investigation in Colombia of military officers involved in the siege. According to a BBC report, Plazas Vega was soon charged with the forced disappearances of 11 people, and was sentenced to 30 years in prison in 2010. In 2012, a Superior Court confirmed the sentence but only for the disappearance of two people, including the surviving M-19 guerilla. In 2015, the Supreme court dismissed his sentence and he was freed.



Carlos Horacio Uran Rojas

In 2008, Prosecutor Angela Buitrago was assigned to investigate the death of Magistrate Uran.

According to the complaint, however, when Buitrago sought to interview "prominent military officials," her boss removed her from the case and reassigned it to the National Unit for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law – effectively shutting down the investigation.

The daughters of Uran Rojas petitioned the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. In 2014, the court "found that Colombian state actors tortured and killed Magistrate Uran following his exit from the Palace of Justice, and ordered the Colombian government to investigate and prosecute those responsible. To date, no individual has been investigated or held accountable in Colombia for Magistrate Uran's killing."

In 2016, now-retired Lt. Col. Plazas Vega "began to travel to the United States – the first time he had done so since the emergence of the new evidence regarding Magistrate Uran in 2007," the complaint says.

Plazas Vega "conspired" with others in the military, including General Arias Cabrales, in a "common plan, design and scheme to carry out the torture and extrajudicial killing or forced disappearance" of suspected guerillas and sympathizers.

The complaint seeks a jury trial to determine damages for the "severe emotional and physical abuse and agony" that Uran Rojas suffered during his torture and extrajudicial killing, as well as the mental pain and suffering his family members suffered.

The case was filed by attorneys for the California law firm [Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati](#) and by attorneys for San Francisco's Center for Justice & Accountability.

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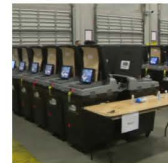
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