



El Salvador Colonel Faces Jail Time in U.S.

Commander accused of war crimes in 1980s will be sentenced on anniversary of El Calabozo massacre.

Nina Lakhani Last Modified: 22 Aug 2013



For 31 years, Chunguita Realegeno has felt guilty about surviving. On August 22, 1982 her parents, two sisters, brother and sister-in-law were killed by soldiers from the Beloso and Altacatl Battalions, US-trained death squads in El Salvador.

More than three decades later, Realegeno is hopeful that justice may finally be served. A court in the US state of Massachusetts has arrested Colonel Inocente Orlando Montano, who led the Belloso Battalion, for committing fraud on his immigration forms when coming to the US.

During El Salvador's civil war, which lasted from 1979-92, the feared battalion conducted scorched-earth operations in the mountainous San Vicente region, where every man, woman

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- Felicita Albarado, massacre survivor

and child was regarded as a guerrilla sympathiser. The soldiers, together with the equally notorious Atlactl Battalion, often systematically hunted down their unarmed enemies.

Between 200 and 300 of Realegeno's friends, relatives and neighbours were slaughtered on the banks of the El Calabozo River, where they had sought shelter overnight. The campesinos were fleeing a ground assault after several days and nights of aerial bombing. Survivors described how people were lined up and shot dead, one by one. The soldiers then reportedly threw chemicals over some bodies, while others were swept away by the powerful river.

Felicita Albarado, 64, kept her six children aged one to 11 alive for eight days on tortilla flour ground-up with a little water and sugar. "The soldiers didn't leave anything or anyone - every person, dog, cow, seed and house was destroyed," she said. "We went looking for our people and found a river of blood. We lost 300, the surrounding villages many more, and so far we have had no justice. Those responsible for the massacres, especially those who ordered the killings, must pay for what they did. We will never give up fighting."

Kidnapped

Realegeno's four-year-old son Milton was kidnapped by the soldiers and given to an army family, a common practice of the death squads. Only she and her seven-month-old son, Ezequiel de Jesus, survived. The half-starved mother and baby returned to a torched house and ruined crops after watching the soldiers leave in their helicopters.

Realegeno, now 58, said, "I couldn't walk with my baby so I let my family go without me. I never saw them again. We hid alone and my baby was crying and crying. He was so hungry but I couldn't produce milk, because I had no food or water. When we went back to our house,

everything and everyone was gone. I couldn't look for their bodies because it was still too dangerous. In the end only the big bones were left; the small bones were gone."



The El Calabozo River, where the massacre took place [Nina Lakhani/Al Jazeera]

The civil war continued for another decade, leaving 80,000 people dead, 8,000 missing and a million displaced. After the peace deal was signed in July 1992, Realegeno was among the El Calabozo survivors who gave evidence to the UN Truth Commission, talking for the first time about what she had seen and the people she had lost.

But a highly controversial amnesty law passed by El Salvador's military-allied Nationalist Republican Alliance (Arena) government in 1993 absolved all those guilty of human rights atrocities. The death squads, paramilitaries, security forces and Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) leftist guerrillas would not be held to account.

The El Calabozo massacre has never been officially recognised by the El Salvadoran government - not even by the FMLN, which came to power for the first time in 2009. The amnesty remains in place despite repeated rulings by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

The dead and disappeared are still unaccounted for; the survivors are sick and elderly. But they still desire justice for the dead.

Montano in court

Last year, the El Calabozo massacre was cited as evidence in criminal proceedings for the first time - in the US state of Massachusetts. Colonel Montano is facing jail time in the United States - not for the countless human rights atrocities he is alleged to have ordered as battalion commander or vice minister of defence for public security, but for immigration fraud.

Montano left El Salvador in 2001 amid renewed international pressure on the Salvadoran government to reopen investigations into the 1989 murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter. Montano, who occupied one of the top three military positions at the time, is among those accused of ordering the murder of the priests, who were trying to negotiate a peace settlement, and "all witnesses" to the crime.

Montano, now 71, pleaded guilty in 2012 to six counts of federal criminal immigration fraud and perjury. He lied on his immigration application about his date of entry into the US and his military past, which helped him gain Temporary Protected Status, an immigration benefit that allows Salvadorans to work legally in the US.

He is due to be sentenced on August 22, the 31st anniversary of the massacre. The judge has strongly indicated that he will consider Montano's human rights record presented to the court during sentencing.

At least 1,169 human rights abuses, including at least 65 extra-judicial killings of named individuals, 51 reported disappearances, and 520 cases of torture, were carried out by troops or units under Colonel Montano's command, according to the prosecution's expert witness, Professor Terry Karl of Stanford University.

Montano is contesting the human rights charges through his own expert witness, General Mauricio Vargas, who graduated from El Salvador's military academy in the same year, 1966.

Immigration fraud

The former colonel may have continued living unnoticed in a Boston suburb, working in a sweets factory, if it weren't for the Center for Justice and Accountability (CJA), which filed a criminal complaint in Spain against him for the massacre of the Jesuits, five of whom were Spanish citizens. Montano was brought to the attention of the US government after the CJA filed a criminal complaint in Spain against him for the Jesuits massacre (five of the priests were Spanish). The Spanish National Court charged him, and 19 others, with crimes against

humanity and state terrorism, and issued international arrest warrants in May 2011.

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- Patty Blum, senior legal advisor at the Center for Justice and Accountability

The Salvadoran Supreme Court refused to extradite the 17 indicted men who were in El Salvador, in contradiction of the bilateral treaty between the two countries. One man, the former chief of staff, is dead, and the former national intelligence director is believed to be in the US, but left his last known address after the indictment, said Patty Blum, a senior legal advisor at CJA.

In his plea agreement, Montano volunteered to return to El Salvador after serving his sentence. But according to Blum, extradition hearings should begin while he is in US custody - which means that Montano could become the first high-level Salvadoran commander to face trial for crimes during the civil war.

"To see the vice minister for defence jailed, even if it is for immigration fraud and not the human rights abuses, will be a major event and cause reverberations in El Salvador," said Blum. "If extradited to Spain, he will be the first top commander in the dock not just for the Jesuit murders, but for any crime committed during the civil war."

On August 22, the survivors of El Calabozo will gather on the riverbank where so many were slain. They will sit together, remember those named on the memorial plaque, and sing a song written by Albarado's husband, as they have every year since the war ended.

Realegeno found Milton, her kidnapped son, after several years of searching in the capital, San Salvador. While not allowed to reclaim him, they at least were able to reconnect. She moved back to San Vicente after the war, to live among people who shared her grief and to be near the spot where her family was killed.

"After the war, the government told us to 'forgive and forget', but I can't. I lost all my people in one day, and those responsible are still free. I am still suffering. I need to see justice."

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