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Florida Man Sued Over Pinochet-Era Murder of Chilean Folk Singer

By Javiera Quiroga September 05, 2013

Musician Victor Jara's family has sued a retired Chilean army officer who lives in Florida for allegedly torturing and killing the folk singer and political activist after a military coup four decades ago.

The Center for Justice and Accountability, or CJA, and Chadbourne & Parke, LLP filed the civil lawsuit on behalf of Jara's family in a Florida district court. They accuse Pedro Pablo Barrientos Nunez of torturing and executing Jara days after Augusto Pinochet seized power on Sept. 11, 1973, according to a Sept. 4 statement posted on the CJA website. Barrientos last year said on Chilean television he was innocent of Jara's death.

Chile's judiciary in December ordered the arrest of Barrientos, prompting the country's Supreme Court to seek his extradition from the U.S. The Florida lawsuit comes as the Chilean judicial association, which represents 70 percent of magistrates in the country, apologized in a statement this week for failing to protect human rights during Pinochet's nearly 17 years in power.

"We are only one of many families still affected by the brutality of Pinochet's rule and the deplorable crimes committed by Barrientos and others in the regime," Jara's widow Joan Jara wrote in the CJA statement. "We want to shine a light on the severe human rights abuses from this era and bring those responsible to justice."

The plaintiffs are seeking compensatory and punitive damages for alleged violations of international and domestic laws, according to the filing. Barrientos couldn't be reached for comment because his contact information wasn't available.

'Remember You'

Jara, whose songs include "Prayer to a Worker" and "I Remember You Amanda," was shot at least 40 times while being held in military custody. Also a university professor and advocate of social and economic equality, Jara was arrested during an army siege of the State Technical University.

Soldiers under Barrientos' command repeatedly tortured Jara before he executed the singer, according to the lawsuit. Jara's widow and her daughters have sought justice since 1978, when they asked Chilean authorities to investigate the killing and prosecute those responsible.

Pinochet's regime killed about 3,000 opponents and tortured thousands more, according to state panels established after Chile's return to democracy in 1990, while laying the foundation for a free-market economy. He died in 2006.

Next week marks 40 years since Pinochet toppled Socialist President Salvador Allende's government. Students and activists traditionally hold protests on the anniversary of the coup, at times clashing with police. Today thousands of high school and university students rallied in downtown Santiago to protest the legacy of the dictatorship.

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