

the guardian

Florida no longer safe haven for war criminals as US prosecutors take action

Accused human rights abuser Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, 77, moves closer to deportation in likely precedent for future cases in Sunshine State

By [Richard Luscombe](#) March 23rd 2015



Daytona Beach in Florida, where alleged war criminals are facing more aggressive federal prosecutions.

As one of an estimated 3.6 million senior citizens living in [Florida](#), Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova found the perfect place to hide in plain sight. From shopping trips with his wife Lourdes in the upscale malls of Daytona Beach to gourmet meals at popular restaurants, he appeared to be just another septuagenarian enjoying the good life in the country's favourite retirement playground.

Vides, however, was guarding a secret. The smartly dressed pensioner was once an army general and defence minister in El Salvador during a bloody 12-year civil war in the 1980s, and he stands accused of covering up a series of atrocities, including the rape and murder of four American churchwomen.

The former Cold War ally of the US had been quietly welcomed in as a lawful permanent resident in 1989, seen as a friend to the conservative Reagan and Bush administrations in an era of leftist insurgency in several south and central American countries.

Now, partly due to the shift in attitudes by Barack Obama's White House toward the pursuit of war criminals, Vides, 77, is a pariah. He suffered a significant blow to his hopes of remaining in Florida last week when [a strongly worded ruling by the Board of Immigration Appeals confirmed a 2012 federal court decision ordering his deportation](#) (pdf).

The panel totally rejected Vides's defence that his conduct, which included allegations that he conspired to hide the torture and rape of detainees, among other human rights abuses, was "consistent with the 'official policy' of the US".

Legal experts say the ruling appears to signal the end of Florida's status as the go-to safe haven for overseas military leaders with dark pasts. While there have been successful prosecutions of other offenders, the Vides case marks the first time federal prosecutors have won a deportation order against such a high-ranking military commander under a 2004 law that prohibits human rights abusers coming to, or living in, the US. And it sets a precedent for the speedier "removal" of other alleged war criminals enjoying life in the Sunshine State, including another El Salvador general, Jose Guillermo Garcia, whose case is also on appeal.



Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova in 2000. Photograph: Marta Lavandier/Associated Press

Florida, with its diverse population, year-round sunshine, low cost of living and endless shopping opportunities – not to mention 1,500 golf courses – has long offered an attractive destination for war criminals seeking to evade justice.

“With its multicultural population from different ethnic backgrounds, [the state] has been the perfect place to blend in and fly under the radar,” said Harry Rhea, a criminal justice professor at Florida International University and an expert in human rights law and global war crimes investigations.

“[But] the United States is pursuing certain types of crimes, tortures, disappearances, massive human rights violations, much more aggressively than it did in the past. Globalisation and modern technology are influencing factors in pursuing the prosecution of war criminals, and it looks good from the outside that you’re living up to your human rights obligations. And as with Vides, who is your friend now might not be your friend later.”

Florida’s history as a bolthole for goons and torturers stretches back to the years after the second world war. “It’s the state with the second-highest number of Nazi prosecutions we’ve done over the years,” said Eli Rosenbaum, former director of the Department of Justice’s office of special investigations and now strategy director for its successor, the human rights and special prosecutions section.

“Of the 137 we’ve brought, it turns out that the highest number was 23 in Illinois; 22 were in Florida. Everyone comes to Florida – the good guys and the bad guys.”

Rosenbaum’s boss, section chief Teresa McHenry, agrees that Florida has been appealing to a newer wave of oppressor, largely from relatively recent trouble spots including Chile, Peru, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua.

But she says the justice department works closely other agencies such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the FBI, and Homeland Security to block those who want to come to the US, and identify and remove those who do.

“The 2004 law is one of a number of tools we have,” she said. “We’re getting more tools to use, new statutes on genocide, torture and child soldiers, some not enacted yet.

“We are committed to doing whatever we can to screen these people out, and if they are here we will work to come after them. The message is we might not always be as quick as we might like, but we will get there.”

The victims of Vides’s alleged crimes, and the Centre for Justice and Accountability, the California-based human rights group that assisted the federal proceedings against him, will probably have to wait a while longer to see him removed. Carolyn Patty Blum, senior legal adviser to the CJA, said Vides was likely to appeal his deportation to the federal court of appeals and it could be another two to three years before the case is concluded.

Diego Handel, the Daytona Beach attorney representing Vides, did not return a call from the Guardian seeking comment but has said in the past that his client denied all wrongdoing and that anything he did was consistent with US policy at the time.

Sarah Saldaña, the director of ICE, which prosecuted Vides, said the case highlighted the government’s determination to deport criminals regardless of how long they had been in the country. “The United States is not a safe haven for human rights abusers. The passage of time will not preclude us from pursuing these cases,” she said.

Murderers in paradise: Florida’s gallery of human rights abusers

Former defence minister and army general of El Salvador. Came to the US in 1989. Among other human rights charges, [is alleged to have covered up the 1980 rape and murder of four American churchwomen and the torture of citizens during the bloody 1979-1992 civil war.](#)

Settled in Daytona Beach, where his wife Lourdes has amassed a large property portfolio. A Florida jury acquitted him in 2000 of murdering the women, but another court ordered him and General Jose Garcia to pay \$54.6m in compensation for the deaths and torturing three citizens. Ordered to be deported in 2012, a decision upheld this month by US Board of Immigration Appeals.

Also served as a general in the El Salvador army and was Vides’s predecessor as minister of defence. Commanded military forces responsible for the El Mozote and Sumpul River massacres, in which 1,367 civilians were killed. As defence minister, blocked investigation into the 1980 assassination of Reverend Oscar Romero, social rights activist and archbishop of San Salvador.

Awarded political asylum in US in 1989 and moved to Plantation, Florida. The US justice department began deportation proceedings in 2009, alleging he used a false passport to enter the country.

Army lieutenant in Chile following Augusto Pinochet's 1973 coup and said to have commanded the brigade that murdered popular poet, folk singer and communist activist Victor Jara during his internment along with thousands of other "subversives" in Santiago's national stadium on 15 September 1973.

Fled to US in 1989 and was granted US citizenship, then disappeared until 2012, when a Chilean TV crew found him living quietly in Deltona, Florida, where he had bought a two-bedroom house in a quiet, tree-lined street.

[Jara's widow and family filed suit alleging arbitrary detention and extra-judicial killing in 2013](#), with a full trial expected in Jacksonville later this year. The Chilean government is seeking his extradition to face various human rights charges with seven other retired army officers still in the country.

Feared Guatemalan special forces paramilitary figure nicknamed "the Kaibilies Killer" for his role in 1982 massacre of 251 people in village of Dos Erres following a military coup earlier that year. Jordan was said to have thrown a live baby down a well and led other soldiers in raping women and killing citizens with hammers before throwing their bodies in the well.

Later fled to South Florida with his wife, bought a house in Delray Beach in 2002 and worked as a chef at a local golf club until May 2010, when ICE agents raided his home.

[Jailed for 10 years by US district court judge in September 2010 for falsely obtaining US citizenship by lying about his role in the massacre](#). Prosecutor Hillary Davidson said after his trial: "He should never have been allowed to live here peacefully for so long."

So-called "Butcher of the Andes" was a patrol leader in the Peruvian army in battle against Maoist rebels during a 1985 insurgency. Led a group of 30 soldiers who killed 74 villagers at Accomarca in August that year by locking them in two buildings, into which they threw hand grenades before setting the buildings ablaze.

Escaped to the US in 2002 when the Peruvian government revoked an amnesty and lived with his mother and brother in a \$1.5m Miami Beach apartment until ICE agents caught up with him in

March 2009 and he was [deported back to Peru](#). Was ordered to pay \$37m to his victims in a civil court action but has never paid up.

<http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/mar/23/florida-safe-haven-war-criminals-federal-prosecutors>