

GUATEMALA

Historic first conviction of military officer for crime of forced disappearance; paramilitary also convicted in related case

[note: RRR letters since 1987 have called for investigations and prosecutions for forced disappearances of civilians and support for organizations that are uncovering evidence that points back to the government, the military, and their paramilitary “death squad” allies in these disappearances.]

Good news: August 31, 2009

A Guatemalan court convicted and sentenced a former paramilitary to 150 years in prison for the forced disappearance of six people who were abducted and presumably killed during the country’s civil war — a landmark ruling hailed by human rights activists.

The sentence against Felipe Cusanero represents 25 years for each victim who disappeared between 1982 and 1984 from the village of Choatalúm. Like many predominantly indigenous Guatemalan villages, Choatalúm—a community of more than 500 Maya Kaqchiquel families in San Martin Jilotepeque municipality, in the department of Chimaltenango—came under attack during the army’s intensely violent counterinsurgency campaign begun in September 1981 under dictator Lucas García and continued until October 1982 by dictator Ríos Montt. Cusanero, a local farmer, was part of a network of paramilitaries who gave information about suspected leftists living in their villages to the army during Guatemala’s counterinsurgency campaign.

He is the first paramilitary to be tried for a forced disappearance. Candido Noriega, a paramilitary from the Quiché region, was sentenced to 50 years in 1999 for dozens of killings while working for the army in the 1980s. He was not tried for forced disappearances, however.

Former Foreign Relations Minister and human rights activist Edgar Gutierrez said he hopes the case will mark an end to impunity for **soldiers and former paramilitaries accused of being behind the disappearance of more than 40,000 people** during the 1960-1996 war.

Families of the victims are demanding Cusanero reveal where the bodies were buried.

Nearly 200,000 Guatemalans were killed during the war. A U.N. truth commission in 1999 found 90 percent of the war’s atrocities were carried out by former soldiers and paramilitaries.

Good news: December 2009

On the evening of December 3, **a court in Chiquimula made history by sentencing former army colonel Marco Antonio Sánchez Samayoa and three former military commissioners, José Domingo Ríos, Gabriel Álvarez Ramos and Salomón Maldonado Ríos, to 40 years of prison for the crime of forced disappearance,** and 13 years and 4 months for the crime of the illegal detention of eight members of the community of El Jute, in the department of Chiquimula in 1981.

This is the first time that a former member of the Guatemalan military has been sentenced for the crime of forced disappearance and only the second ever sentence to be passed in Guatemala for forced disappearance.