



Residents of Pambach bury the remains of a community member exhumed at the CREOMPAZ base. Photo: James Rodríguez

CREOMPAZ:

The largest case of forced disappearance in Latin America

On January 6, 2016, 14 former military officers were arrested on charges of forced disappearance and crimes against humanity based on evidence uncovered at the CREOMPAZ military center in Cobán, Alta Verapaz. Now a United Nations peacekeeper training base, CREOMPAZ (Regional Training Command for Peacekeeping Operations) operated as a detention and clandestine execution center during Guatemala's internal armed conflict, when it was known as Military Zone 21. As this goes to print, 10 of the 14 have been indicted on charges and will be put on trial for the largest case of forced disappearance in Latin America's history.

Between 2012 and 2015, the Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala (FAFG) carried out 14 exhumations at CREOMPAZ and found 558 human remains in four graves – some of the largest mass graves found to date in Guatemala. Ninety of the bodies found belonged to children. Most showed signs of torture, with contusions to their heads and throats; many were shot execution-style and were found with blindfolds and other ropes and chains around their ankles and necks. So far, FAFG has confirmed that 128 of the bodies correspond to disappearances from between 1981 and 1988, the time period when those arrested formed part of the chain of command governing Military Zone 21.

The CREOMPAZ case sets the record in Guatemala for both the time span over which the crimes were committed and for the number of disappeared victims. Among the high-ranking individuals indicted is Manuel Benedicto Lucas García, who served as former Army Chief of Staff during his brother's 1978-1982 military dictatorship.

The trial is an important step in the legal trajectory seeking justice for crimes against humanity and represents more than 30 years of hard work by survivor organizations.

“This case is contributing to the fight against impunity at a national level. As a transitional justice case, it is helping uncover what happened to over 500 people, which is needed to ensure the crimes are not repeated and that we can have a true democracy.”

José Alberto Flores, FAMDEGUA



CREOMPAZ PLAINTIFFS

Association for the Integral Development of the Victims of
Violence in the Verapaces - Maya Achí (**ADIVIMA**)



Families of the Detained-Disappeared (**FAMDEGUA**)



Mutual Support Group (**GAM**)



Coordination of Victims of Alta Verapaz (**CODEVI**)



Community of Plan de Sánchez



Neighbors Association of Chicoyoguito



The Plan de Sánchez massacre and ties with CREOMPAZ

During the armed conflict, the areas surrounding Cobán were hit hard by the counterinsurgent scorched earth policies enacted by *de facto* regimes, particularly those of General Romeo Lucas García and General Efraín Ríos Montt. More than 60 massacres took place in the department of Alta Verapaz alone and thousands more were disappeared. Although survivor testimonies were documented as early as the 1980s, impunity kept justice at bay for more than 30 years.

In 2012, five former civil defense patrollers were convicted in Guatemala for their role in the July 18, 1982 Plan de Sánchez massacre, during which soldiers and civil defense patrollers rounded up the residents of the Maya Achí community and tortured, raped, and slaughtered more than 250 people. Survivors were forced to dig graves for the victims and were threatened with further violence if they spoke out.

Nevertheless, witnesses testified in 2012 to the existence of other mass graves in the former Military Zone 21. The ensuing verdict sentenced the five accused to 7,710 years each in prison for murder and crimes against humanity and ordered the Public Prosecutor's office to verify the existence of the clandestine graves. Although the sentence did not touch the high-ranking officials that ordered the massacre, it paved the way for further investigations into the responsibility of higher-ranking positions.

Military Zone 21

While clandestine cemeteries at CREOMPAZ were originally investigated in connection to the Plan de Sánchez massacre, DNA testing has linked the site to forced disappearances in six other communities in the Alta and Baja Verapaz regions: Pambach, Río Negro, Caserío Chituj, Chiacal, Barrio San Sebastián, and Chisec.

In the case of Pambach, soldiers arrived at the community in 1982 and took 75 young men, allegedly to provide military service, but none were ever seen again. Thirty-one of those men have been positively identified in a mass grave at CREOMPAZ containing the remains of 64 people; it is believed that the remaining unidentified bodies may also be from Pambach.

Likewise, after the 1982 massacre in Río Negro, survivors testified that women and children were taken to Military Zone 21. Since then, the bodies of many women and children have been found during exhumations at CREOMPAZ, including a positive DNA identification of two women and one child who were disappeared during the Río Negro massacre.

The legal case is built on more than 350 testimonies that include survivor accounts of the forced disappearances and massacres committed by the Guatemalan military, as well as other expert testimonies on the country's historical, political and social context, forensic anthropology and genetic identification.

For the plaintiff organizations and survivors who have assembled it, this case is about more than a guilty verdict for crimes against humanity and forced disappearance. Families have spent decades searching for their disappeared relatives, with the hope that coming forward will give them information on their whereabouts and, ultimately, a dignified burial.

Links to today

Like the majority of cases for transitional justice in Guatemala, the CREOMPAZ case challenges the power of key figures and parallel state structures that have persisted in the post-conflict era. Although President Jimmy Morales came to office as a so-called outsider, his administration keeps with the pattern of close ties to the military elite – several of whom have been named in this case.

César Augusto Cabrera Mejía directed the military intelligence section (S2) of the Cobán military base in Military Zone 21 from 1982 to 1983 and is one of 10 men indicted. Later, he became the head of military intelligence under the government of Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo, at a time when a series of high-profile political assassinations occurred with the support of military intelligence, including the murder of well-known Guatemalan activist and anthropologist Myrna Mack.

Cabrera Mejía remains a well-known player in the Cofradía, or Brotherhood, a fraternity of former and current military personnel formed during the Lucas García administration with links to organized crime and state and parallel power which continue today. Many members of the Cofradía were given civilian posts after the signing of the Peace Accords and have been accused of embezzling millions of dollars from the state, among other crimes. In fact, Cabrera Mejía worked as an advisor to the Minister of Health under former President Otto Pérez Molina, at a time when the UN-backed International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) revealed the existence of major corruption in the Ministry. After massive and sustained public protests related to this scandal and others, Otto Pérez Molina was forced to step down and was indicted on charges of corruption in September 2015.

Before the January arrests in the CREOMPAZ case, then-incoming President Jimmy Morales named Cabrera Mejía as his top choice for the influential position of Minister of the Interior.



"The same people who carried out genocide in Nebaj were the same who carried out genocide in Plan de Sánchez and throughout Baja and Alta Verapaz. It's important that the high-ranking military command are tried for these crimes."

Benjamín Jerónimo, survivor & representative from Plan de Sánchez

FAFG carries out an exhumation at the CREOMPAZ base. Photo: CPR Urbana

Similarly, top advisor to President Morales, Edgar Justino Ovalle Maldonado, was named as a person of interest in the case for his role as an operations official at the Cobán base in 1983. He is allegedly responsible for carrying out orders in the region at the same time as many of the bodies identified in the exhumations were disappeared.

Maldonado is a School of the Americas graduate and active member of the right-wing organization AVEMILGUA (Guatemalan Veterans Association), which has been outspoken in denouncing cases against former soldiers for crimes against humanity and making public threats against human rights organizations and their supporters. Maldonado is a founding member of the FCN (National Convergence Front), a party founded in 2008 by right-wing military interests and the party that brought Jimmy Morales to power last year.

As an elected Congressman at the time of the arrests, Maldonado maintains diplomatic immunity and cannot be formally investigated. The fact that the Constitutional Court immediately dismissed the creation of a commission to assess his immunity status demonstrates his power and the willful reluctance of President Morales to support processes of justice.

Likewise, the Lucas García family retains a powerful presence in the country, particularly in the Cobán region where major massacres and forced disappearances took place during the family's dictatorship as one way to control territory. These lands would be used to develop oil exploration and African palm plantations along the Franja Transversal del Norte, the Northern Transversal Strip. The area, in which the Lucas García family had major holdings, was known as the "General's Zone," and the presence of military landowning interests is still felt today.

U.S. militarism in Central America and the importance of the CREOMPAZ case

The CREOMPAZ case is one of the many legal battles being fought in Guatemala that challenges powerful actors of the present in search of justice and accountability for crimes of the past. In a moment during which power is highly contested in the U.S., we must also acknowledge a need for accountability on the part of the U.S. government, whose military and policy apparatuses have facilitated atrocities in Guatemala and elsewhere.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, U.S. foreign policy supported various repressive governments in Latin America, many of which carried out crimes against humanity with training and direct support from the U.S. military. Through its political, diplomatic, and financial support of the Lucas García regime under President Ronald Reagan, the U.S. government bears responsibility for the forced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, and torture that took place at Military Zone 21, amidst widespread human rights violations under the commands of Lucas García, Ríos Montt, and others.



U.S. President Ronald Reagan meets with de facto Guatemalan dictator Efraín Ríos Montt in 1982. Photo: Corbis Images



Former military officers indicted on charges of crimes against humanity. Photo: Nelton Rivera

While former President Bill Clinton apologized in 1999 for the role the United States played in promoting policies of genocide in Guatemala, the terrible consequences of U.S. foreign policy persist and are being repeated in the region today. The March 3, 2016 assassination of indigenous leader Berta Cáceres, a staunch defender of land and rivers threatened by transnational corporations, is a direct result of support given by the Obama administration and Hillary Clinton's State Department to the 2009 coup in Honduras. The waves of repression leading up to and in the aftermath of the U.S.-supported coup are responsible for the deaths of dozens of human rights defenders since 2009.

U.S. militarism, combined with neoliberal economic policies that cater to transnational corporations, is both a driving force and condition of migration today; while Guatemalans and other Central Americans flee militarist legacies on their home soil, they are forced to cross an increasingly militarized Mexican and U.S. border. As communities within the U.S. face increased militarization in the policing of black and brown bodies, communities, and lives, a growing complex of border industries profits from increased border militarization.

Our solidarity calls us to stand against the U.S. militarization of our communities, borders, and foreign policy while also demanding justice for the crimes wrought by past U.S. militarism. A guilty verdict in the CREOMPAZ case would be one important step towards uprooting entrenched impunity and ongoing militarization that puts those seeking justice at great risk.



Aura Elena Farfán (left) and Blanca Rosa Quiroa de Hernández (right), founding members of FAMDEGUA. Photo: James Rodríguez

We stand with the survivors and advocates in the CREOMPAZ case, as we do with those who demand no more violence and death at the hands of U.S. militarization today.

International accompaniment

Since the January arrests, witnesses, plaintiff organizations, and forensic teams report multiple direct threats and intimidations, while survivors from Plan de Sánchez have noted an increased military presence in the area. In the weeks following the arrests, pro-military organizations staged several marches, both in the Cobán region and in the capital.

In this climate, survivor organizations and legal teams have asked for ongoing international accompaniment as a security measure. With ACOGUATE, NISGUA has provided consistent international human rights accompaniment to survivors from Plan de Sánchez through their participation in the genocide cases filed in 2000. We expanded our presence during the 2012 trial against the civil patrollers directly responsible for the massacre in their community, and are providing accompaniment to plaintiff organizations in the CREOMPAZ case.

Follow @NISGUA_Guate on Twitter and regularly check our blog for ongoing coverage and analysis of the trial. #CasoCREOMPAZ, #JusticiaCREOMPAZ, #CREOMPAZ



HUMAN RIGHTS ACCOMPANIER NEEDED IN GUATEMALA

NISGUA sends trained volunteers to Guatemala as human rights accompaniers to support local organizations facing threats, harrassment and violence by providing an international presence and human rights observation.

Application deadline: October 15, 2016
Training: January 7-13, 2017 (Berkeley, CA)
Placements available throughout 2017, minimum commitment of 6 months.

For more information visit: nisgua.org

About NISGUA

NISGUA builds mutually beneficial grassroots ties between the people of the U.S. and Guatemala and advocates for grassroots alternatives to challenge elite power structures and oppressive U.S. economic and foreign policy.