



Massacre Suspect Wanted in Spain

By Amy Taxin
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A Spanish judge has issued an international arrest warrant seeking the extradition of a former Guatemalan soldier suspected of involvement in a brutal 1982 massacre during Guatemala's civil war, a court official said Monday.

Judge Santiago Pedraz ordered the arrest of 53-year-old Jorge Sosa Orantes for his alleged role in the massacre in the village of Dos Erres in 1982 in which more than 100 people died, the court official said.

Sosa faces charges of crimes against humanity, according to the court official, who spoke on condition of anonymity in keeping with policy.

The more-than-three-decade civil war in Guatemala claimed at least 200,000 lives before it ended in 1996. The U.S.-backed army was responsible for most of the deaths, according to the findings of a truth commission set up to investigate the bloodshed.

Sosa has been in custody in the Canadian province of Alberta since January on U.S. charges of lying about his role in Guatemala's war when he applied for American citizenship in 2008. He lived for many years in Southern California, working as a martial arts instructor.

In Guatemala, Sosa was allegedly a member of a special military unit known as the "kaibiles" and helped command a unit assigned to track down suspected guerrillas who had stolen military weapons, according to court papers filed in Santa Ana, California.

In December 1982, Sosa and several dozen soldiers stormed the village of Dos Erres, searched homes for missing weapons and systematically killed men, women and children, according to the documents. Soldiers bludgeoned villagers with a sledgehammer, threw them down a well, and raped women and girls before killing them, court papers say.

The Spanish court official said the arrest order was issued Friday via Interpol, and that Pedraz made it as part of an investigation into allegations made by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Rigoberta Menchu in Spain in a 1999 lawsuit.

That lawsuit focused on the disappearance of eight Spanish priests in Guatemala, and an attack on the Spanish Embassy in Guatemala in 1980 in which Menchu's father and more than 30 others died.

The former soldier's arrest in Canada has revived hopes of bringing the case to trial for survivors of Guatemala's war, after many gave up on their own sluggish court system, said Almudena Bernabeu, a lawyer with the California-based Center for Justice and Accountability.

"They want a trial. They want the opportunity to testify," Bernabeu said. "They gave up the possibility of getting this kind of justice in their own country, at home, at least for now, but they have understood for years the importance of efforts that come from abroad."

Sosa is the ninth suspect sought by the Spanish National Court since Menchu filed the suit. To date, none have appeared because Guatemala refused to extradite the other eight suspects, according to the Center for Justice and Accountability.

The Dos Erres massacre is just one of the attacks covered by the case. Spanish prosecutors have alleged that Guatemala's armed forces launched a systemic campaign in the early 1980s to round up and kill off native Mayans who they believed were allies of communist-inspired guerrillas fighting the military government.

The case was brought in Spain under the concept of universal jurisdiction — the idea that crimes such as torture and genocide are so heinous they can be prosecuted here if the government of the country where those crimes were allegedly committed fails to probe them. Such cases have been brought in Spain against former Chilean dictator August Pinochet and Osama bin Laden.

Sosa's lawyer in Canada, Alain Hepner, could not be reached immediately because the phone at his law office rang busy.

Sosa holds both U.S. and Canadian citizenship. It is unclear whether he would be extradited to Spain or to the United States, where he was indicted by a federal grand jury in September on naturalization fraud. Sosa is also wanted in Guatemala and some human rights advocates have been pushing for Canada to keep him there and charge him with crimes against humanity.

Taxin reported from Los Angeles.