

Guatemalan ex-commando loses U.S. citizenship, gets jail term for massacre

BY TIM JOHNSON

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Demonstrators stand outside the federal courthouse in Riverside, Calif. on Monday, Feb. 10, 2014, after the sentencing of Jorge Sosa, a former second lieutenant of the Guatemalan army, who was convicted to ten years in prison for making false statements on his U.S. citizenship application.

AMY TAXIN — AP

MEXICO CITY — A federal judge in California on Monday revoked the U.S. citizenship of a former Guatemalan special forces officer and sentenced him to a maximum 10-year prison term for deceiving U.S. immigration officials and covering up his role in a 1982 massacre of 250 villagers in Guatemala, one of the worst atrocities in modern times in Latin America.

Jorge Sosa Orantes, now 55, was a lieutenant when he led fellow Guatemalan commandos into the Dos Erres jungle hamlet and killed villagers, according to a Justice Department statement, by “bludgeoning them on the head with a sledgehammer, shooting them or throwing them into the village well while still alive.”

“This prosecution demonstrates our resolve to deny safe haven to human rights violators and to ensure that these criminals are held accountable,” said acting Assistant Attorney General Mythili Raman.

Human rights activists said the jail term handed down to Sosa sends a message to other retired Latin American military officers living in the United States that they remain vulnerable despite past accommodation between previous U.S. administrations and repressive regimes in the Western Hemisphere.

Sosa “was a middle lower-level guy,” said Almudena Bernabeu, head of the transitional justice program at the San Francisco-based Center for Justice and Accountability, a legal advocacy group. “But he was a guy with blood on his hands.”

Bernabeu said survivors of massacres in Central America have awaited justice for decades knowing that some perpetrators obtained U.S. citizenship.

“From the victims’ perspective, this is really exciting,” she said.

The extent of the 1982 Dos Erres massacre became fully exposed only in the mid-1990s, when an Argentine team of forensic anthropologists excavated a 40-foot well where they found 162 skeletons, 67 of them of children under age 12.

According to testimony at Sosa’s trial, he and some 40 commandos under his leadership entered Dos Erres on Dec. 6, 1982, seeking to recover weapons lost in a nearby guerrilla ambush two months earlier that left 21 soldiers dead. The commandos removed villagers from their homes, separated the men from the women and children, and raped some of the young girls.

Experts now say they believe the commandos exterminated nearly all 250 villagers in Dos Erres, believing they sympathized with a leftist guerrilla movement.

Guatemala admitted responsibility for the massacre in 2000 before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, but a 2004 judicial decision gave the perpetrators amnesty.

The 36-year civil war in Guatemala that ended in 1996 left 200,000 people dead, the vast majority killed by state forces trying to end the leftist insurgency.

Sosa eventually settled east of Los Angeles, where he worked as a karate instructor, according to an investigation by ProPublica, a nonprofit investigative journalism organization. When Sosa got

wind of a federal investigation against him in 2010, he fled to Mexico, then on to Canada, where he was arrested in 2011.

Sosa's attorney, H.H. Kewalramani, said his client maintains his innocence.

"We're disappointed with the sentence and we'll be filing a notice of appeal," Kewalramani said.

A federal jury convicted Sosa on Oct. 1 of making false statements and unlawfully procuring U.S. citizenship when he applied for U.S. residency in 1997 and when he obtained citizenship a decade later.

U.S. immigration agents have taken action against other Guatemalan special forces commandos, known as Kaibiles, involved in the Dos Erres massacre.

In one case, an ex-commando, Gilberto Jordan, had already become a U.S. citizen. In 2010, Jordan was sentenced in Florida to a 10-year jail term for lying on his citizenship application.

Another former Kaibil, Pedro Pimentel Rios, was deported to Guatemala in 2011 and subsequently tried for the Dos Erres massacre and sentenced to 6,060 years in prison. A fourth ex-Kaibil, Santos Lopez Alonso, is currently held in a holding facility pending a U.S. decision on his deportation.

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Read more here: <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2014/02/10/217659/guatemalan-ex-commando-loses-us.html#storylink=cpy>