

Justice For Guatemalan Mayan Q'eqchi' Women As Military Officers Jailed For Sexual Slavery

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Justice At Last For Guatemalan Women As Military Officers Jailed For Sexual Slavery

By [Nina Lakhani](#), 1 March 2016

http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/01/guatemala-sexual-slavery-sepur-zarco-military-officers-jailed?CMP=share_btn_fb

[After 20 days of dramatic testimony](#), a retired army officer and a former paramilitary were convicted on Friday, February 27, 2016, of sexually enslaving 15 indigenous women during the country’s civil war.



Female victims of sexual slavery covered in scarfs raise their hands at the verdict in the trial of two military officials in Guatemala City. Photograph: Esteban Biba/EPA

Former military commissioner Heriberto Valdez Asij was jailed for 240 years for crimes against humanity and the forced disappearance of seven of the women's husbands. Lieutenant Colonel Esteelmer Reyes Girón was sentenced to 120 years in jail for crimes against humanity and the murder of 20-year-old Dominga Cuc Cocand her two daughters.

On Tuesday, the women will be awarded compensation for the long-term physical, psychological and economic harm suffered as a consequence of being systematically raped and forced into bondage for up to six years.

But after more than 30 years of shame, the women had perhaps already received a form of justice when the court declared: "We believe you ... it wasn't your fault ... the army terrorised you in order to destroy your community."

Throughout Guatemala's 36-year civil war, rape was widely used as a weapon, according to human rights groups. But last week's ruling marked the first time, anyone had faced justice for sexual violence during the conflict – and the first time anywhere in the world that sexual slavery perpetrated during an armed conflict had been prosecuted in the country where the crimes took place.

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Jo-Marie Burt, [political science professor at George Mason University](#) and senior fellow at the Washington Office on Latin America (Wola) who documented the proceedings, said: "This emblematic case made visible the kind of violence visited upon women's bodies during the armed conflict and sends a very powerful message that the justice system can hold these perpetrators to account. It symbolises justice for the countless other women who were sexually violated in the conflict."

The post-war Commission for Historical Clarification documented 1,465 such cases, and almost 90% of the victims were indigenous women.

In this instance, the military set up camp in the village of Sepur Zarco at the end of 1981 after local landowners complained about campesino leaders who were trying to acquire legal titles for the land on which their families had lived and farmed for centuries.

Fifteen of these men were killed or forcibly disappeared. A few months later in 1982, 11 of their wives were [forced into slavery at the camp](#), where they were repeatedly raped. The other four escaped to the mountains where they had only nylon sheets for shelter and rainwater to drink; many of their children died from exposure and starvation.

Throughout the trial, the 14 surviving victims aged between 52 and 75, sat very still in court with their heads covered in traditional embroidered shawls, just a few metres away from the accused.

One of the first prosecution witnesses was Rogelio Hüitz Chon. "I was a prisoner at Sepur Zarco, and I have the scars to prove it," he told the court. Hüitz lifted his shirt to reveal scars he said were from being tortured and thrown into a pit when he was 12 years old.

The court then heard from [Petrona Choc Cuc](#) who said she, her husband, and their four children fled to the mountains in 1982 as soldiers rounded up their neighbours. "At night we wrapped ourselves up in nylon sheets. We got rained on. There were many insects ... This is not the product of my imagination; I lived this. We suffered a great deal."

The family was eventually found by soldiers and Choc Cuc's husband was killed, but the children managed to flee deeper into the mountains until they could no longer endure the dire conditions. "We went to the military base and got on our knees and begged them to forgive us, to not kill us," she said in her recorded testimony.

"Many times I was raped. One of my daughters was raped too ... Every day I suffer because of what they did to me."

A number of women testified that they were forcibly given contraceptives by military medical staff.

Demecia Yat de Xol explained how she was raped at home and then forced to live on the camp for months as punishment for searching for her disappeared husband. "They put us [women] in a room and began raping us. I was pregnant at the time and suffered a miscarriage."

Yat also testified that her cousin Dominga Cuc was locked in a small house at the base and raped by soldiers until she was "practically lifeless". "I don't know who gave the order but we could hear them shooting, then we heard that she had been killed," she said.

Cuc's elderly mother Julia Cuc Choc told the court how years later when the bodies were exhumed, "They found hair, clothes, and my daughter's bones. But they only found the undergarments of my granddaughters. Their bones had turned to dust."

Another witness, Rosa Tiul, described how she was forced to cook for the soldiers for six months during which time she was taken to different rooms and raped by up to six men at a time. The terror continued even after she was allowed to return home. "The [soldiers] told me if I didn't let them [rape me] they would kill me," she said.

"Sometimes they tied me down and put a rifle on my chest ... They knew which ones of us [women] were alone ... They treated us like animals."

One of the most stirring moments of the trial came in the second week when the court was presented with 38 boxes containing the remains of 51 victims recovered by forensic anthropologists from Sepur Zarco and another nearby base. The bones were so badly decomposed that only two of the victims, including Rosa Tiul's husband, have been successfully identified.

At one point, Reyes's defence lawyer Moisés Galindo – who previously defended the former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt at his 2013 trial for genocide – caused uproar when he accused the victims of being prostitutes, and dismissed the experts and protected witnesses as liars. In his own defence, Reyes repeatedly denied working at Sepur Zarco.

Valdez swore until the end that he had served 25 years as a respected local police officer and had never been in the army.

As the three judges re-entered the courtroom on Friday, the 14 women sat quietly with their heads covered, just as they had throughout the trial.

Judge Yassmin Barrios began by stating that the court found the evidence against the defendants credible and consistent. "Rape is an instrument or weapon of war. It is a way to attack the country, killing or raping the victims, women were seen as a military objective," said Barrios.

The packed courtroom erupted into cheers as Barrios said that both men would serve 30 years for crimes against humanity. Reyes was given another 90 years – 30 each for the murders of Dominga Cuc Coc and her daughters Anita and Hermelinda. Valdez received another 210 years for the forced disappearance of seven men.

More Information – Sepur Zarco Trials

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Film: "Two Struggles For Justice: Sexual Violence Against Mayan Q'eqchi' Women In Guatemala"

By ECAP (Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Accion Psico-Social)

Documenting two struggles for justice by Mayan Q'eqchi' women: -1- Women from Sepur Zarco filed a criminal complaint for sexual abuse and domestic slavery suffered in an army outpost during Guatemala's state repression against its own people in the 1970-1980s; -2- Women from Lote Ocho filed a civil lawsuit in Canada against Hudbay Minerals for gang-rapes they suffered by security agents in 2007.

- Video español: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4aOOSnJ4qo>
- Video q'eqchi'-inglés: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEoFrsAyyf8>

Book: "Clamor por la Justicia" / "Clamor for Justice"

By ECAP (Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Accion Psico-Social)

Documenting the lives and stories of the women of Sepur Zarco and the women of Lote 8, all victims of gang-rapes, all involved in courageous struggles for truth and justice.

- Spanish version:
http://ecapguatemala.org.gt/sites/default/files/Clamor%20por%20la%20justicia%20version%20final_1.pdf
- English version: available on request

Tax Deductible Donations in U.S. and Canada

To support the struggle of the Mayan Q'eqchi' women of Lote 8 to rebuild their lives and community, and to seek justice in Canada for the rapes they suffered, make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

- U.S.: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887
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