

Victims renew calls for justice as El Mozote trial moves ahead

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Massacre in El Salvador sanctioned by the U.S. government

San Salvador, May 3 (RHC)-- Expert testimony delivered in El Salvador last week has revealed significant new details about what many consider to be the most brutal massacre of the country's 12-year civil war decades ago.

Victims, experts and lawyers say the five days of hearings in the El Mozote trial uncovered new information about the extent of the United States's knowledge of the 1981 massacre of nearly 1,000 civilians by U.S.-trained Salvadoran forces, as well as the Salvadoran chain of command.

"The fact that there are experts giving professional testimony reiterating and corroborating the truth that the victims have maintained during all these years, is a form of reparations, of clarifying the truth and of sending an echo through the international community," said Eduardo Guerrero, a lawyer with the victims' legal team through the Costa Rica-based Center for International Justice and Law (CEJIL).

The hearings came at a moment when U.S. President Joe Biden's administration is pressuring Central American governments to practice good governance, crack down on corruption and reduce impunity.

They also are fuelling renewed demands for accountability and for an apology from the US, which, in the 1980s, funnelled billions of dollars to the Salvadoran government as part of its push to "fight communism" in the region, often turning a blind eye to rights abuses.

The U.S. government has yet to issue an apology for its role in human rights violations in El Salvador, including the El Mozote massacre, even though it has apologised for other Cold War-era atrocities in the region, such as the Guatemalan genocide and the Argentinean Dirty War.

"It would be a great relief for us as survivors, who lost so many family members, [to receive an apology from the U.S. government]," said Rosario Sanchez, a survivor of the El Mozote massacre who attended the hearings at the court in San Francisco Gotera, Morazan, this past week.

"The U.S. also has a responsibility because they shouldn't have given money for such atrocities," she told Al Jazeera by phone. The El Mozote case was reopened in 2016 after the country's Supreme Court overturned a 1993 amnesty law that prevented the prosecution of human rights abuses carried out during the war.

An estimated 75,000 Salvadorans were killed in the fighting between a leftist armed rebellion and the US-backed Salvadoran army between 1980 to 1992. A UN Truth Commission attributed about 85 percent of the violence during the conflict to the Salvadoran state.

The El Mozote massacre took place during the course of three days in December 1981, as Salvadoran soldiers raped and killed civilians in several villages in El Salvador's northeast region of Morazan. Seventeen Salvadoran military officers are currently facing charges in relation to the killings, including torture, rape and enforced disappearances. Lawyers for the victims say a judge could decide that the case, still in its discovery phase, will continue to the second, formal trial phase by the end of 2021.

During the hearings last week, U.S. academic and Central America expert Terry Karl testified that the Salvadoran army employed an "extermination strategy" in El Mozote and described a subsequent cover-up by Salvadoran and U.S. officials.

Karl said a U.S. military adviser, Sergeant Major Allen Bruce Hazelwood, was present in Morazan department, where the massacre took place. "If this had been made public, aid from the US would have been cut because that was illegal," Karl said during her testimony, which was based on research in El Salvador dating back to 1981, extensive interviews with key players in the Salvadoran civil war and a review of archival materials. She also said the U.S. was aware that the Salvadoran army was using napalm, a highly flammable mixture banned by the United Nations for use against civilians in 1981.

David Morales, a lawyer with San Salvador-based human rights group Cristosal who is part of the victims' legal team, told reporters at the court that Karl's account overwhelmingly showed that this type of military operation "could only be carried out with the planning, orders, supervision and cover-up by the Salvadoran high command".

Clever Pino, a former Peruvian colonel and expert in counterinsurgency tactics, also testified on April 29 and 30 that a new military document showed Operation Rescate, the army's official name for what occurred in December 1981, was ordered by high-level officials.

This detail was especially revealing as the army has refused to comply with a judicial order to allow the judge in the case to review military archives – a major challenge for the case.

“The systematic denial by the Salvadoran Armed Forces of Operation Rescate is a disinformation strategy,” Pino said during his testimony, adding that the tactic “is used when the facts are too obvious or compromising and all that’s left is denial.”

The Salvadoran government has not issued any public statements about last week’s testimony through official channels. Neither the president’s office nor the defence ministry responded to Al Jazeera’s request for comment in time for publication.

In the past, the Salvadoran Armed Forces have said the fighting at El Mozote was between the army and rebel fighters, rather than unarmed civilians.

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