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Guatemala City, June 12 (RHC)-- A Guatemalan appeals court disobeyed a ruling from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights by ordering the release of three former high-ranking military officers

convicted of crimes against humanity. In March, the regional human rights court halted the release of the prisoners “to prevent irreparable damage to the right of access to justice for the victims”.

The verdict was not the first time Guatemala authorities have disregarded rulings by the court – they have been condemned for it 14 times before. The original 2018 sentencing of the men actually came about as a result of a 2004 condemnation by the rights court, which rebuked decades of impunity in a case centred around the forced disappearance and aggravated rape of members of the Molina Thiessen family.

But it was the first case Guatemala authorities have done so in a situation that involves releasing prisoners already convicted of serious crimes. It also came as watchdogs warned of deteriorating democracy and a growing embrace of authoritarian tendencies in Central America. In Guatemala, critics have gone as far as accusing elites of trying to “hijack Guatemala’s justice system” for political benefit.

The military officials winning out from the appeals court decision are Francisco Luis Gordillo Martínez, Manuel Antonio Callejas y Callejas, and Manuel Benedicto Lucas García. In 2018, the men were sentenced to between 33 and 58 years in prison for crimes against humanity, the forced disappearance of a 14-year-old boy, and the rape of his sister.

Despite Friday’s decision, the men still have not been released from prison because they still await rulings in two other trials against them for crimes of genocide and forced disappearance.

Jovita Tzul, lawyer for the Molina Thiessen family, rejected the final decision of the appeals court as “a regrettable resolution, which generates serious setbacks in terms of human rights.”

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