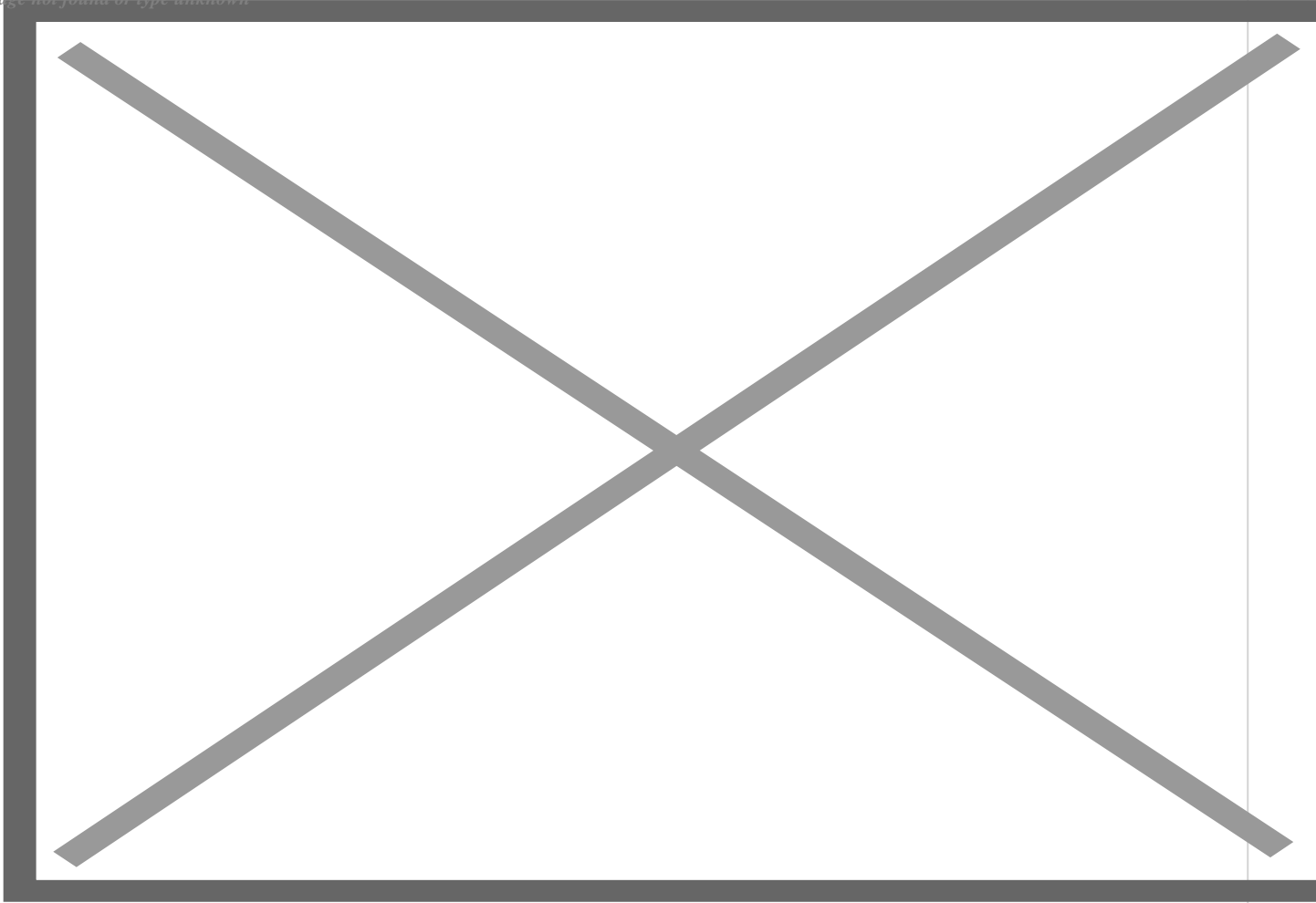


Colombian court accuses soldiers of killing 120 civilians

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A transitional peace court has concluded that more than 6,400 civilians were extrajudicially killed by the Colombian military between 2002 and 2008 [File: Christina Noriega/Al Jazeera]

Bogota, July 7 (RHC)-- A Colombian court has accused 10 members of the military and a civilian of forcibly disappearing 24 people and murdering at least 120 civilians and falsely presenting them as fighters who had been killed in combat.

It is the first time that the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) tribunal in Bogota accused members of the army of being involved in the so-called "false positive" scandal.

The JEP, which is investigating crimes and atrocities committed during half a century of armed conflict in the country, ruled earlier this year that Colombia's military had carried out at least 6,400 extrajudicial killings and presented them as combat deaths between 2002 and 2008.

The court said on Tuesday that the defendants played a decisive role in the murders, which were presented as combat deaths in the Catatumbo region of Colombia's Norte de Santander province between January 2007 and August 2008.

The accused, identified by the JEP as those responsible for giving orders without which the crimes would not have systematically happened, included a general, six officers, three non-commissioned officers, along with a civilian.

"It was a pattern of macrocriminality, which is to say, the repetition of at least 120 murders during two years in the same region by the same group of people associated with a criminal organization and following the same modus operandi," magistrate Catalina Diaz said on Tuesday.

The tribunal was created under the 2016 peace deal to prosecute former members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebel group and Colombian military leaders for alleged war crimes.

Dozens of army officers have been detained and convicted by Colombia's regular court system for their part in the murders and have testified before the JEP as they seek more lenient sentences.

If those accused on Tuesday do not accept the charges within 30 days, they could receive a sentence of up to 20 years in jail in a civilian court, said magistrate and JEP President Eduardo Cifuentes.

Juan Pappier, a Colombia researcher for Human Rights Watch, called the court's announcement "a vindication for victims and human rights groups that have been fighting for justice in this case for more than a decade," the New York Times reported.

Human rights groups have argued for years that the practise of military troops killing and falsely representing civilians as enemy combatants was more common than the Colombian government acknowledged. A 2018 report, compiled with official sources and independent research, estimated that more than 10,000 civilians were murdered during the administration of former President Alvaro Uribe.

While the military high command has denied there was a systematic policy of inflating the numbers of killed left-wing rebels with so-called "false positives," soldiers and officials have told the court that superiors pressure them to boost the appearance of success in the government's military campaign during the civil war.

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