

# Cracks in the Wall of Impunity

In Guatemala, justice in the wake of civil war atrocities has seemed no more than a fond hope—but last summer, a landmark court decision against authors of a massacre has given hope to victims and their families who are seeking justice.

Last August, in a Guatemala City courtroom, four former soldiers were each sentenced to more than 6,000 years of imprisonment for the 1982 massacre of 201 victims in the village of Las Dos Erres, plus an additional 30 years for crimes against humanity. The villagers had been shot or bludgeoned to death and their bodies thrown into a well.

With DFAIT's help, a Canadian NGO, Lawyers Without Borders Canada (LWBC), provided key support to lawyers and groups of victims in this trial.

For Pascal Paradis, Director General of LWBC, based in the city of Québec, it was a unique moment of truth and justice. Sitting in the courtroom, he saw hundreds of Guatemalans rise from their seats and begin hugging each other.

"They had been waiting decades for justice—and it was a day of great hope, a day on which history was being made."

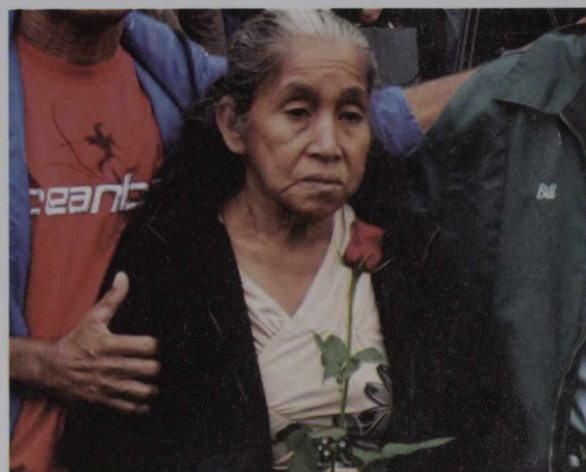
Back in 1982, a special operations unit of the Guatemalan army entered the village of Las Dos Erres and killed almost everyone. This was one of hundreds of such atrocities that took place during the civil war of 1960 to 1996, during which more than 200,000 people, most of whom were living in rural regions and indigenous communities, were killed. Due to the weakness of the justice and law-enforcement systems, the authors of mass atrocities committed during the war were enjoying near-total impunity.

Hoping to break the wall of impunity, LWBC helped to strengthen Guatemala's first law office that specializes in litigation of the most important cases of serious crime, offering free legal assistance to the most vulnerable groups, in particular women and indigenous people. The office rapidly acquired trust and legitimacy from justice stakeholders and is currently working on 23 cases of major importance for the future of justice in Guatemala. By helping to bring these landmark cases to justice, LWBC is helping to create jurisprudence, reduce impunity and reinforce the rule of law.

All of this has been done with assistance from DFAIT's Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force (START).

"We want to help Guatemalans have confidence in their justice institutions," says Nadine Khoury, START's program analyst for Central America. "We want to see precedent-setting legal processes that demonstrate that the rule of law can be effectively applied."

Through DFAIT's Global Peace and Security Program, START has committed nearly \$5 million since 2009 to promote human rights and strengthen the security and justice sectors. START also supports conflict-management efforts at the border area between Belize and Guatemala, as well as efforts to combat the trafficking of vulnerable youth by criminal networks.



Top: Relatives of massacre victims held demonstrations outside the court.

Bottom: Applause rang through the court after the verdict.  
photos: Ana Elisa Samayoa

Guatemala has more violence than almost any other country officially at peace. There is much work to do. But Monica Izaguirre, an LES officer at the mission in Guatemala City, says Guatemalans are feeling more confident day by day.

"When we see the end of impunity, we know we can begin to move forward; we can begin to build a real future."