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PERU | Four military officers to face trial for 1984 Putis massacre

A Peruvian court has found that sufficient evidence exists to put four military officers on trial for crimes against humanity for the 1984 Putis massacre, which claimed the lives of 123 villagers, the majority of whom were Christians.

On December 13, 1984, 123 villagers, including infants and the elderly, were gunned down by members of the Peruvian military in the community of Putis in the south-eastern highlands of Ayacucho Department. Many of the young women were gang-raped before being killed.

Nine months after charges were filed by the Ayacucho public prosecutor against General Wilfredo Morí Orzo, Juan Briones Dávila, Carlos Celso Soto Mesinas and Luis Oscar Grados Bailetti, the judge found that the four men held positions in the military at the time of the massacre that would indicate they had knowledge of and were involved in the military's activities.

General Morí Orzo was in command of the Ayacucho Second Infantry Division of the Peruvian Army, which executed the massacre with support from a unit known as The Lynxes Company. The Lynxes, led by Grados Bailetti and also under the command of Morí Orzo, have been linked to other human rights atrocities in the region including the now emblematic 1985 Accomarca massacre, in which 69 civilians were murdered by security forces.

The mass graves in Putis were exhumed in 2007, under the supervision of Dr. Cristina Olazabal, the Ayacucho public prosecutor at the time, and with support from the Peruvian protestant human rights organization and CSW partner, Peace and Hope. The remains of the victims were recovered and subjected to DNA analysis in order to identify them. In some cases, where entire families had been wiped out, definitive identification was not possible.

The five-year delay between the exhumation and this week's decision is largely due to stonewalling from the Ministry of Defense. Despite repeated requests from the public prosecutor's office, the ministry and the military refused to identify the individual soldiers responsible for carrying out the massacre. In the absence of this information, the public prosecutor's office took the decision to proceed with filing charges against the officers in command of military operations in the area.

Dr Milton Campos, a lawyer from Peace and Hope representing the families of the victims, said that the court's decision has "revived confidence in the relatives of the more than one hundred victims of this massacre, who hope that the judicial authorities will recognize their right to justice and the truth, carrying out a detailed investigation of this barbaric act and handing down an exemplary punishment to those responsible."

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said, "The people of Putis have waited 27 long years for justice. With this long overdue decision to try the military officers responsible for this horrendous crime, they are one important step closer. We congratulate the Ayacucho public prosecutor's office and our partners at Peace and Hope and other organizations, who have investigated and tirelessly pursued this

case over the years. We now call on the military and the government, specifically the Ministry of Defense, to cooperate fully as the trial proceeds and to take concrete steps to end the culture of impunity in Peru.”

Notes to Editors:

1. Peru was wracked by an internal conflict from 1980-2000 as government forces battled two extreme left guerrilla groups, the Shining Path and the MRTA. The Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission found that the conflict claimed at least 70,000 lives. The Shining Path was responsible for the majority of these deaths, but government forces were also responsible for a significant percentage, and both sides are responsible for human rights atrocities and crimes against humanity. The Shining Path was militantly anti-religion and was responsible for targeted persecution of Christians. Some members of the military were also responsible for human rights atrocities committed against communities of faith and church leaders.
2. There are an estimated 1000 mass graves as a result of the conflict, and the majority have not been exhumed. Putis is one of the most significant because of its size.