

FINDING OSCAR**Immigration Charges For Accused
Commando In Dos Erres Massacre**

Jorge Vinicio Sosa Orantes had become a U.S. citizen while allegedly concealing his military service and involvement in the infamous 1982 attack that left more than 250 people dead in a remote Guatemalan village.

by Sebastian Rotella, Sept. 21, 2012, 5:53 p.m. EDT



A former Guatemalan Army lieutenant was extradited Friday from Canada to stand trial in Southern California on federal charges related to the massacre of 250 people in a Guatemalan village in 1982, a case that has resulted in landmark human rights prosecutions in Guatemala and the United States.

U.S. federal officers took custody of Jorge Vinicio Sosa Orantes in Calgary Friday morning and were en route to Los Angeles, U.S. officials said. Sosa, 54, is the highest-ranking officer to have been arrested on charges alleging direct involvement in the massacre by a 20-man unit of elite commandos in the northern Guatemalan farming hamlet of Dos Erres.

In May, ProPublica reported the story of Oscar Alfredo Ramírez Castañeda, who learned only last year that he was a Dos Erres survivor. He had been abducted by a commander of the unit and raised by his family.

Sosa, a karate instructor who holds both U.S. and Canadian citizenship, fled his home in the Los Angeles area in mid-2010 as agents of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) closed in on him. He went to Mexico and then to Lethbridge in western Canada, where he has family, and was arrested in January of last year, according to U.S. and Canadian court documents. Last month, a Canadian appeals court ended his legal fight to avoid extradition to the United States.

Because U.S. courts do not have jurisdiction for the massacre, federal prosecutors indicted Sosa on charges of lying on immigration forms. He allegedly concealed his military service and involvement in Dos Erres on the forms when he obtained citizenship in 2008 and residency 10 years earlier, according to an indictment filed in 2010. The trial could start in about two months in federal court in Riverside, Calif.

In Dos Erres, Sosa allegedly oversaw the slaughter of men, women and children who were dumped in a well during a day-long frenzy of torture, rape and pillage, according to U.S. and Guatemalan court documents. He allegedly fired his rifle and threw a grenade into a pile of living and dead victims in the well, according to the testimony in Guatemalan courts of two former soldiers who are now protected witnesses.

Sosa was a sub-lieutenant at the time, junior in rank only to three lieutenants in the squad of highly-trained commando instructors. Sosa denied guilt during a recent telephone interview with ProPublica from jail in Calgary. He said he was in another village doing a military public works project on the day of the massacre in December 1982. He described the charges against him as the product of a conspiracy.

The Dos Erres case was one of the worst of hundreds of massacres during Guatemala's 30-year civil war, which ended in 1996 and resulted in more than 200,000 deaths. In "Finding Oscar: Massacre, Memory and Justice in Guatemala," ProPublica told the story through the odyssey of Oscar Ramírez Castañeda, now a 33-year-old father of four living in Boston. After a dogged investigation by Guatemalan prosecutors, Oscar learned last year that his life until that point had been based on a lie.

DNA tests proved that when Oscar was age 3 and living in the village, a commando lieutenant spared his life and abducted him after the unit killed the boy's mother and eight brothers and sisters. The lieutenant died in an accident months later, but his family raised Oscar as if he were one of their own. Oscar, an illegal immigrant who came to the United States in 1998, is now a father of four and works two full-time jobs.

After he learned that he was living proof the massacre, Oscar applied for political asylum. A decision is pending. He met in recent months with a prosecution team from the U.S. Department of Justice and is prepared to

tell his story as a witness against Sosa, according to his lawyer, R. Scott Greathead.

"Oscar is ready to provide them with whatever assistance they need," said Greathead. "The Sosa prosecution is very significant. It represents an important law enforcement effort on the part of the U.S. government to punish human rights abusers who make false representations to the U.S. government to get asylum and citizenship."

A key eyewitness will likely be Santos Lopez Alonzo, a former member of the commando unit. Alonzo abducted and raised a 5-year-old boy from Dos Erres who, like Oscar, had survived the attack. Alonzo migrated illegally to Texas, where he was arrested in 2010 for illegal re-entry after deportation and offered to testify against other Dos Erres suspects, according to court documents. He was sentenced to time served and is in federal custody as a material witness, according to court documents.

The prosecution's approach to the Sosa case resembles the investigation of Gilberto Jordan, a former commando who was tracked down in Florida by ICE agents in 2010. Jordan confessed his role in the massacre and pleaded guilty to similar immigration charges. Jordan received the maximum 10-year sentence and is serving time in federal prison.

U.S. authorities deported to Guatemala another former commando who was arrested in California. He became one of five suspects in the case who were convicted by Guatemalan courts. Seven suspects, including the two senior officers in the unit, remain at large.

The suspects were first charged in Guatemala in 2000, but the case remained in limbo because of legal appeals and political resistance by the powerful armed forces. The hunt for the killers in Guatemala and the United States began in earnest in 2010 as the result of a ruling by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the appointment of Attorney General Claudia Paz y Paz, who has aggressively pursued war crimes and corruption.

Dos Erres is the first massacre of the civil war to result in convictions in Guatemala. It has become a test of the capacity of that nation's embattled justice system to confront impunity and lawlessness. Prosecutors have also charged Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt, Guatemala's former dictator, in the Dos Erres case.



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