



Guatemala: Family of disappeared man seeks justice at the United Nations

News release

Geneva, 20 November 2020 - Human rights lawyers acting for the wife and daughters of a man abducted by the Guatemalan army have filed a case with the United Nations Human Rights Committee. It is the first time that the Committee is asked to examine a situation of enforced disappearance in the Central American country.

Emil Bustamante López, a 32-year-old veterinarian and sociologist, was arrested in February 1982 by members of the Guatemalan Army and was never seen again. His wife was pregnant with their second daughter at the time. Despite his family's efforts over the years, the authorities have never provided any information on his fate. Over 40,000 people are estimated to have been forcibly disappeared during Guatemala's civil war, which lasted from 1960 to 1996. Their relatives, mainly women, continue looking for them despite the passing of time. The conflict also killed at least 250,000 people and saw a genocide against the indigenous Mayan population, according to an UN-appointed commission.

"The case of Emil Bustamante López is emblematic of the absolute impunity for the massive violations of human rights that we still face in Guatemala", said Evelyn Recinos Contreras, the Guatemalan lawyer who, together with the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), has brought the case to the UN Human Rights Committee. "We have seen no meaningful investigations and no punishment of the culprits. The consequences are devastating for the families of the disappeared, who cannot heal as long as they don't find out what happened to their loved ones."

Only six cases of enforced disappearance have received criminal sentences in Guatemala. There have been a few regional convictions from the Inter-American human rights system, which the State has failed to fully implement.

"Challenging entrenched impunity is crucial for the future of Guatemala, a country that remains one of the most violent in the world and where independent judges and prosecutors are under threat", said Gerald Staberock, OMCT Secretary General. "We hope that the experts on the Human Rights Committee will send a strong message to the authorities by requiring them to investigate Emil Bustamante's disappearance and to punish the culprits."

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