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Guatemalan court annuls conviction of former dictator

by Catholic News Service

Guatemala City — Guatemala's highest court annulled the conviction of a former dictator found guilty of genocide and crimes against humanity.

The constitutional court threw out the May 10 ruling against Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt, 86, who had been sentenced to 80 years in prison for crimes carried out in 1982, when he allegedly initiated a policy of extermination of Mayans for their ties to Marxist guerrillas. The ruling was seen as historic in a country known for its impunity.

The five-judge constitutional court panel ruled May 20 that the trial should have been halted April 19 during a series of challenges by lawyer Francisco García, who was expelled earlier for trying to have judges dismissed for bias.

In a 3-2 ruling, the constitutional court said anything presented in the trial before April 19 could stand, but anything introduced or argued after that date would need to be presented again.

Ríos Montt became de facto president after leading a coup in March 1982. Another coup brought his government to an abrupt end in August 1983. The trial was focused on the murders of more than 1,700 Ixil people.

The general's former intelligence chief, José Rodríguez Sánchez, was cleared by the court.

Guatemala's 36 years civil war left an estimated 200,000 dead and 45,000 missing when it ended in 1996.

NCR's previous reporting: Ríos Montt found guilty of Guatemalan genocide.

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