

Grenada coup leaders ask for leniency

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ST. GEORGE'S, Grenada --

Lawyers for 13 leaders of a coup that prompted the U.S. invasion of Grenada pleaded for leniency at a resentencing hearing on Monday, saying their clients have experienced a "spiritual transformation" in prison.

The death sentences imposed in 1986 on former Deputy Prime Minister Bernard Coard and the other prisoners were thrown out in February by the London-based Privy Council, the highest court of appeal for the former British territory.

The prisoners were convicted of killing former socialist leader Maurice Bishop, four Cabinet members and six supporters in a coup that led to the U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983.

"The defendants continue to maintain their innocence of these charges, but express their deep sorrow at the events of that day," said lead defense attorney Edward Fitzgerald. "They've also accepted moral responsibility for the tragedy."

He urged the presiding judge of the Supreme Court not to impose sentences of more than 35 years in consideration of the prisoners' "spiritual transformation."

Defense lawyers read testimonials from other inmates, including a 17-year-old convicted thief who said the defendants taught him to read and write.

The judge is expected to issue new sentences this week.

During the 1986 trial, prosecutors said Coard and other hard-line members of the Marxist government sent soldiers to kill Bishop on Oct. 19, 1983, considering him too moderate.

Six days after the killings, thousands of U.S. troops stormed the Caribbean island on a mission that President Reagan said would restore order, protect American medical students and prevent a buildup of Cuban military advisers and weapons.

The hearings are being held in a trade center to accommodate more than 100 observers. Police threatened to arrest a relative of one of the victims who approached a prisoner during a bathroom break.

Four others convicted in 1986 were spared death sentences. They included Coard's wife, who was freed in 2000 to undergo cancer treatment.

