

Menchu criticizes Guatemalan high court

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GUATEMALA CITY --

Nobel Peace Prize laureate Rigoberta Menchu lashed out Monday against a Guatemalan high court decision not to arrest or extradite former military officers accused of genocide, torture and terrorism committed at the height of Guatemala's civil war.

Menchu, an Indian rights activist, filed charges in Spain against former officials allegedly involved in such abuses, including a 1980 raid that left her father and other protesters at Spain's embassy in Guatemala dead.

A Spanish Judge agreed to issue arrest and extradition warrants for former dictator Efraim Rios Montt and other ex-leaders, but Guatemala's high court on Dec. 12 declined to honor his order.

Spain's constitutional court in 2005 ruled that its tribunals can hear crimes against humanity cases even when Spanish citizens are not among those affected.

"This only confirms the reason why I did not trust the Guatemalan justice system and filed the complaint in Spain in 1999," Menchu said of the ruling, which was handed down last week but not announced until Monday.

Benito Morales, Menchu's lawyer, said he would ask the court to reconsider the ruling.

Menchu said the former officials "can no longer leave the country because international arrest warrants are still active elsewhere."

The case stems from charges she filed in Spain in 1999 for the disappearance of Spanish priests and a fire allegedly set to oust protesters from the Spanish Embassy during Guatemala's civil war. Menchu's father and 36 others died in the blaze.

Rios Montt, who was not in power at the time of the fire, has denied knowledge of any atrocities committed by military officials during his 1982-1983 regime, one of the bloodiest periods in Guatemala's 36-year civil war.