

8 former Argentina officers convicted

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BUENOS AIRES, Argentina --

Seven former army officers and an ex-police official were convicted Tuesday and sentenced to at least 20 years in prison for human rights abuses during Argentina's bloody dictatorship.

Judge Ariel Lijo issued the unexpected ruling just over a week after Argentina's new President Cristina Fernandez took power, vowing to push the justice system to speed scores of slow-moving human rights cases to conclusion.

"Justice has been served," said Eduardo Luis Duhalde, the nation's human rights minister, who praised the court's decision to punish officers for a "killing machine" he said they unleashed in a 1980 operation to quash leftist guerrillas.

"I'm pleased with this sentence and everything that was proved in this trial," Duhalde said.

Ex-army commander Cristino Nicolaidis and seven other former officers were found guilty on a range of charges linked to the kidnapping, torture and disappearance of leftist guerrillas seized by the country's military regime.

The leftist Montoneros had secretly entered Argentina to organize a "counteroffensive" against the 1976-83 junta, but several were swiftly captured and at least five tortured and executed at an army base northwest of Buenos Aires, prosecutors said.

A fifth guerrilla suspect, detained while trying to flee over Argentina's border to Chile, survived.

"Murderers!" some spectators shouted out at the public proceeding before the defendants were led from court.

The ruling marked the first time that a group of former ranking officers were convicted together since 1980s-era amnesty laws were revoked in June 2005 by the Supreme Court. The laws had sheltered scores of suspected human rights violators from prosecution for decades.

Among those sentenced with Nicolaidis were former army officers Jorge Arias Duval, Juan Carlos Gualco, Carlos Fontana, Pascual Guerrieri, Santiago Hoya, Walter Roldan and former police officer Julio Simon.

Nicolaidis, Arias Duval and Hoya each received a 25-year sentence, while Gualco, Roldan and Simon got 23 years each. Fonta was ordered to serve 21 years in prison, and Guerrieri, 20 years.

Lawyers for Nicolaidis, 80, said illness kept him from attending the final court session, but the others were present.

Federal prosecutor Jorge Alvarez Berlanda urged 27-year sentences on charges including kidnapping and torture of the leftist guerrillas who sought to topple the country's military regime in 1980.

Nearly 13,000 people are officially listed as killed or missing as a result of what prosecutors called the dictatorship's "Dirty War" against dissent. Human rights groups say the toll is closer to 30,000.

In 1990, President Carlos Menem pardoned nine junta leaders convicted on charges of abduction, torture and execution. Lower-ranking officers also received pardons.

Simon already was sentenced last year to 25 years in prison for human rights abuses linked to the 1978 disappearance of a married couple.

Given the chance Tuesday to make last words in his defense, Guerrieri declared himself "completely innocent."

"We were soldiers," he told the judge. "We brought order, not repression, to this society. Don't let this be about revenge."