

Peru's Fujimori defiant as trial begins

Peru's former president, Alberto Fujimori, faces up to 30 years in prison on several charges, including approving a death squad to quash insurgencies.

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LIMA --

Former President Alberto Fujimori went on trial Monday on charges of approving a death squad. He energetically rejected the allegations and said he saved Peru from disaster by crushing leftist insurgencies in the 1990s.

Fujimori is accused of approving the actions of a death squad known as the Colina Group which, among other crimes, killed 15 people at a party in Lima's Barrios Altos neighborhood in 1991 and nine students and a professor at La Cantuta teachers college, also in Lima, the following year.

Another case involves the abduction and torture of a journalist and a businessman at an Army intelligence office.

If convicted, Fujimori, 69, could be sentenced to a prison term of up to 30 years.

He categorically rejected the charges, shouting during the opening session of his trial that he did nothing wrong. Fujimori said that he took over Peru on the abyss, amid hyperinflation, international isolation and rampant guerrilla "terrorism."

"Thanks to my government, the human rights of 25 million Peruvians were recovered. I reject the charges. I am totally innocent," Fujimori yelled, his hand slicing the air.

OPINION DIVIDED

This is the first time that a Peruvian president has stood trial -- Fujimori also faces six other charges -- and the opening session demonstrated the profound differences Peruvians have concerning his presidency from 1990 to 2000.

Both supporters and critics of the former president staged demonstrations at the entrances to the headquarters of the police Special Operations Division, where Fujimori has been jailed since September and where a courtroom has been built for the trial.

His supporters, with their faces painted the bright orange that was his campaign colors, chanted for Fujimori's freedom.

Most carried signs saying that he pacified Peru, a reference to the dismantling of two leftist guerrilla groups in the early 1990s.

"The president saved our country. Thanks to him there is now order and the terrorists are in jail," Miriam Chávez said between shouts demanding Fujimori's release.

At another entrance, human rights groups and labor union members gathered to support the relatives of victims of the two massacres.

"We have been waiting for this day for 15 years. I want to know why they killed my brother. I want to know why Fujimori let this happen," said Celia Pablo Meza. Her brother Heraclides was one of the students killed at La Cantuta.

Fujimori, a math teacher and former university dean, won the presidency in 1990. He took over a country with accumulated inflation of more than 2 million percent, an economy that had shrunk by 14 percent the previous year and with the Shining Path and Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement guerrillas roaming freely around the country.

His government tamed inflation and in 1992 dealt near-fatal blows to the rebel groups, capturing the founders of both factions.

In the meantime, though, he shuttered Congress and the judiciary as the government grew increasingly dictatorial. He also rewrote the constitution to allow for immediate presidential reelection.

CORRUPTION SCANDAL

Fujimori's presidency lasted until November 2000, less than six months after his third election, when he fled a massive corruption scandal. He faxed home a resignation from Japan, his parents' homeland, and remained there for five years. He secretly left Japan for Chile, Peru's southern neighbor in 2005, in an apparent effort to return to Peru and run for president in the 2006 elections.

The move proved to be a serious miscalculation. Fujimori was immediately arrested by Chilean authorities and the country's Supreme Court approved his extradition in September on the charges included in the current trial, as well as other charges involving gross corruption.

One of those cases, involving the illegal search and seizure of an apartment belonging to the estranged wife of his intelligence advisor and closest ally, Vladimiro Montesinos, is expected to conclude Tuesday.

A guilty verdict is expected, given that even Fujimori's supporters admit he broke the law.

'Alberto admits that his order to search Montesinos' house was illegal. This is a minor charge and the request for a seven-year sentence for usurping public functions is illogical. At best, he could be found guilty on an administrative charge," said Santiago Fujimori, the president's brother and a member of the national legislature.

To win an acquittal in the death squad trial, Fujimori and his lawyers will have to refute the testimonies of Colina Group members who claim that he knew and approved of their actions, including the Barrios Altos and La Cantuta killings.

Fujimori's defense team also has to contend with newly declassified U.S. government documents that lend credence to the charge that his government used illegal methods to target subversive groups.

While not specifically related to the cases in the trial, one declassified Defense Intelligence Agency cable states that Fujimori had a direct role in the executions of rebels who had surrendered in April 1997 after a four-month hostage siege at the Japanese ambassador's residence in Lima.

"President Fujimori issued the order to take no prisoners," says the cable, declassified under a Freedom of Information Act request filed by the National Security Council, a Washington-based organization.

The embassy hostage crisis, in which Fujimori's mother and one brother, Pedro, were held, began 11 years ago next week.