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In a daring and historic move just one week before a new president takes office, Guatemalan authorities arrested 18 former high-ranking military men Jan. 6 for massacres and forced disappearances during the bloodiest years of the dirty war that particularly targeted indigenous populations.

Most of the arrests resulted from an investigation that exhumed the remains of 558 people -- 90 of them children -- buried in clandestine mass graves on a military base in Cobán, formerly known as Military Zone 21. DNA testing identified victims who were killed or disappeared by the military in the 1980s. Many of the bodies were blindfolded, bound or dismembered.

Guatemala Attorney General Thelma Aldana called it "one of the biggest cases of forced disappearance in Latin America."

Records show that 12 of the 18 arrested were trained at the U.S. Army's School of the Americas (SOA), highlighting the sordid U.S.-support for the war, which spanned from 1960 to 1996 and claimed the lives of some 250,000, many of them women and children.

The most prominent of those arrested are Gens. Benedicto Lucas García, and Gen. Manuel Antonio Callejas y Callejas, both graduates of SOA, now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

In the early 1980s, during the peak of the government's repression, Lucas Garcia was the army's Chief of Staff while Callejas y Callejas was the Director of Intelligence.

The arrests came just a week before incoming president Jimmy Morales takes office on Jan. 14. Morales, a former television comedian, ran as the candidate of the National Convergence Front (FCN), a party he co-founded that's dominated by military officers.

Prosecutors are seeking to arrest Morales' top aid, Edgar Justino Ovalle Maldonado, on similar charges of crimes against humanity and forced disappearances. Ovalle Maldonado, also an SOA graduate and a FCN co-founder who helped Morales get the FCN's nomination, currently has immunity as a legislator. But Aldana has appealed to the Supreme Court to revoke his immunity.

Ovalle Maldonado was an Operations Officer at the Cobán military base in 1983, and later the commander of the base, according to Amnesty International. He is reported to have claimed that the mass graves merely served as cemeteries for two towns near the base.

Morales will be succeeding former President Otto Pérez Molina, another SOA graduate, who resigned last September as the result of a popular uprising over government corruption and is now facing bribery charges.

Further heightening the drama is the retrial of former military dictator Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt on charges of genocide. The proceedings begin today (Jan.11) for the SOA graduate, who was convicted of the same charge in 2013, but saw the verdict overturned on a technicality.

Another SOA graduate arrested in the Jan. 6 sweep was Col. Francisco Luis Gordillo Martínez, who helped Ríos Montt overthrow the government in 1982. He, Ríos Montt and another SOA graduate formed a junta that created secret tribunals, repealed the constitution, abolished the legislature, and escalated a "scorched earth" policy to wipe out entire villages.

Records show that Gordillo Martinez was a three-time graduate of SOA, graduating from its infantry Weapons and Infantry Tactics programs in the 1960s and from its Command and General Staff College in 1974.

Another SOA graduate -- Col. Ricardo Mendez Ruiz -- commanded the Cobán military base

where the bodies were found from 1980 to 1982, the year he became the Minister of Interior under Rios Montt. Mendez Ruiz died Jan. 1, five days before the arrests began.

Details on the current charges against the 18 officers are sketchy, and limited to the mass graves at the Cobán base and the case of a Guatemala City teenager disappeared in 1981 by the military. But human rights investigators have long documented the human rights records of those arrested.

The Guatemalan Catholic church's human rights office estimated the number of dead from counterinsurgency operations in 1981 alone to be 11,000, most of whom were indigenous peasants living in the Highlands.

Lucas García took command of the counterinsurgency campaign in the Highlands in October 1981, according to anthropologist Shelton Davis*, writing in *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis*.

The campaign, Davis said, was marked by massacres, targeted killings of community leaders, and the burning of houses and fields to terrorize the Indian population into not joining the guerillas.

Callejas y Callejas was arrested in connection with the 1981 disappearance of a Guatemala City teenager, but his tenure as chief of intelligence coincides with the slaughter of thousands of Mayan Indians, the murders of 27 professors, more than 80 union leaders and four priests, including American Fr. Stanley Rother and the failed 1980 attempt to murder Quiche Bishop Juan Gerardi.

As it turned out, Gerardi was assassinated 18 years later, just two days after releasing a four-volume study showing that the military forces were responsible for 90 percent of the atrocities in the war.

Both Lucas García and Callejas y Callejas graduated twice from the SOA. Lucas García was trained in 1965 in combat intelligence while Callejas y Callejas was trained in 1962 in communications. Both men later graduated in 1970 from the school's elite Command and General Staff College.

Callejas y Callejas rose to become the Armed Forces Chief of Staff, and despite his horrific

human rights record, the U.S. State Department approved his induction in 1988 into the School of the Americas Hall of Fame.

The Hall of Fame induction underscored U.S. complicity, says Roy Bourgeois, a former Maryknoll priest who founded the SOA Watch after learning that the school had trained the killers of six Jesuit priests in El Salvador 1989.

In 1990, Bourgeois was arrested after throwing blood on the Hall's gallery where the portrait of Callejas y Callejas hung alongside that of several Latin American dictators.

The U.S. intervention, he said, was extensive. "Several U.S. administrations trained, advised, funded and armed the Guatemalan military. Many of its military and intelligence officers were on the CIA payroll."

Bourgeois and other human rights activists have hailed the Guatemalan arrests.

Grahame Russell, co-director of Rights Action, a Canadian NGO engaged in human rights work throughout Central America, called it "an extraordinarily positive step forward" in a country where military impunity has been the rule.

In an interview with the Venezuelan-based TeleSUR television network, Russell praised the Guatemalan attorney general for filing a "series of war crimes charges" stemming from "the worst years of the U.S.-backed repression and genocide."

The filing was especially significant, he said, coming "just as another military-backed president is about to assume the presidency, in this as yet very undemocratic country." With Morales strong links to the military, Russell believes that the country will likely continue to be "dominated by the same economic elites -- national and international -- that were in power during the worst years" of the 1970s and 1980s.

Still, Bourgeois draws hope from the fact, that against all odds, Guatemalans themselves -- from the prosecutors to the "courageous survivors and relatives of the disappeared" -- have risked their lives to bring the perpetrators to justice.

"They want the truth, and they want it to come out. And they are willing to die for it," he said. "They've waited some 35 years. The strategy of the military has been to keep stalling until those responsible have died off. But there will never be any justice or reconciliation until there is accountability and the perpetrators start going to prison."