

An honorable judge

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Chilean judge Juan Guzmán Tapia recently died in Santiago de Chile.

News recently broke of the death of Chilean judge Juan Guzmán Tapia, the first lawyer in that country to lead investigations and prosecute dictator Augusto Pinochet, although some judicial mechanisms failed to enforce the regulations in this case.

In January 1998, the judge took over the case known as the "Caravan of Death" -- a heinous repressive action organized under Pinochet's direct orders shortly after the coup d'état against President Salvador Allende in September 1973.

It was a nationwide 'tour' by a group of military officers, under the command of General Sergio Arellano Stark, with the aim of assassinating dozens of people in several cities, who had been arrested after the coup and were awaiting illegal courts martial.

Guzmán managed to evade the Amnesty Law enacted by the coup regime to protect perpetrators of serious human rights violations, by demonstrating that the bodies of those executed had never been found. Therefore, they fell within the category of disappeared and according to international law, forced disappearance is a crime that continues to be committed until the victim is found.

With such a track record, the Spanish magistrate Baltazar Garzón obtained in October 1988 an international arrest warrant for Augusto Pinochet, enforced when the dictator was visiting the United Kingdom. British authorities, however, decided to return him to his country.

Still, Guzman did not cease in his efforts to pursue justice for the victims of these crimes, and finally the general had the title of Lifetime Senator withdrawn.

Thus, in 2001 he managed to indict him for the crimes of genocide, kidnapping, illicit association and illegal burial, but Pinochet was held on house while awaited the corresponding trial. His attorneys argued that his alleged poor health made him unfit to stand trial, and Pinochet died in 2006 without having been convicted and held accountable for the crimes committed.

Judge Guzmán retired in 2005, thus putting an end to a 35-year career characterized by audacity and resilience in the face of the enormous pressures he had to endure to demonstrate that, in a normal world there's nothing before justice.

An honorable judge whose legacy lingers for those who have the power to condemn wrongs and atrocities and those willing to invoke true justice.

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