
Paraguayan Peasants Get Stiff Sentences for Deadly Clash

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ASUNCION – The 11 peasants charged in connection with an armed clash in 2012 that resulted in 17 deaths and led to the ouster of Paraguay's then-president were sentenced on Monday to prison terms ranging from four to 30 years.

The reading of the verdict was interrupted by protests from defense attorneys and supporters of the defendants inside the Palace of Justice in Asuncion.

Controversy surrounded the year-long trial, which focused solely on the deaths of six police officers in what became known as the Curuguaty massacre.

No one has been charged with the killings of the 11 peasants who died during the events of June 15, 2012, on the Morumbi property, a spread of 2,000 hectares (4,938 acres) in the eastern municipality of Curuguaty.

Authorities had sent more than 300 police officers backed by helicopters to clear peasants off the estate, pursuant to a court order obtained by Morumbi's owner, prominent politician and businessman Blas N. Riquelme.

Ruben Villalba, found guilty of killing the commander of the police contingent, Erven Lovera, was sentenced to 30 years behind bars.

Defendant Luis Olmedo got 20 years as Villalba's accomplice, while two other men were each sentenced to 18 years in connection with Lovera's death.

Opponents of President Fernando Lugo seized upon the violence at Curuguaty as a pretext to remove the head of state.

On June 22, 2012, the opposition-dominated lower house voted overwhelmingly to impeach Lugo, and the Senate

adopted a schedule that called for the president's trial to begin at 12:00 p.m. the following day and a verdict to be rendered before nightfall.

Only four of the 43 senators present at the session voted against finding Lugo guilty of misfeasance.

Lugo, a former Catholic bishop, was elected in 2008 at the head of a broad-based coalition in favor of reform in the poor, landlocked South American nation.

Paraguay's partners in the Mercosur trade bloc characterized Lugo's removal as a coup and suspended Asuncion from the organization for several years.
