

Zedillo faces massacre claims in US

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Fourteen years after the killing of 45 villagers in Mexico, victims' relatives are pursuing the ex-president through American courts

Mexico's former president, Ernesto Zedillo, is facing a human rights lawsuit in the United States. Relatives of victims of the [Acteal massacre](#) accuse him of crimes against humanity and promoting the formation of the paramilitary groups that murdered 45 people who were praying for peace in a chapel in 1997.

Earlier this month, a case against Zedillo was brought by 10 people in a district court in Connecticut. The claimants' identity has not been made public, and their names will not be revealed in order to protect them since they still live in [Mexico](#).

On 22 December 1997 a paramilitary group, armed and protected by the highest military, police and civil authorities, murdered 45 helpless people in the state of Chiapas with premeditation and treachery. Most of the victims were children and women, five of them pregnant. The massacre was carried out in the context of a counter-insurgency, or irregular warfare strategy, against the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. Zedillo was then president.

It is the first time that a former Mexican president has been sued in a foreign country on a human rights case. The lawsuit is a civil action demanding compensation for crimes against humanity, extrajudicial executions, cruel and inhumane treatment, and deprivation of civil rights such as that of political association.

Zedillo, who left office in 2000, is now director of the [Centre for the Study of Globalisation](#) at Yale University. He also takes part in several UN projects as well as in international commissions that recommend policies on drugs. In Mexico he maintains a discreet but effective influence on key mass media.

The legal foundation for the lawsuit is in the [Alien Tort Claims Act](#) (ATCA) and the [Torture Victim Protection Act](#) (TVPA), which claim universal civil jurisdiction for the United States to proceed against those responsible for crimes against international law. The ATCA, enacted by Congress in 1789, stipulates that the US courts have "original jurisdiction of any civil action by an alien for a tort only, committed in violation of the law of nations or a treaty of the United States."

The first stage of the proceedings will end on 6 January. Zedillo's lawyers have reportedly tried to block the case by asserting his immunity as a former head of state of a sovereign country.

In Mexico, Zedillo has kept silent. Not so in the US. In an email to the Yale Daily News, he said the accusations were "vile (...), untenable and obviously false". He added: "This is a calumny invented for reasons unknown to me."

It's not the first time that Zedillo has been blamed in the US for the Acteal massacre. In 2005, human rights group the Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas and civil organisation Las Abejas filed a petition before the International Commission on Civil Rights against the Mexican state for the murder of the 45 Tzotzil indians. This was covered by the US press, and the petition was admitted in 2010.

The 14th anniversary of the Acteal massacre was on 22 December. The attempts to distort the facts and relieve Zedillo and other officials of his government of any responsibility for them have been in vain. The Acteal dead are alive in those who have not forgotten them and who demand justice.

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