Defendant: General Efrain Rios Montt

Location: Guatemala

Dates Active: 1980s

Crimes Accused: Genocide, Crimes against Humanity, War Crimes

Overview: General Efrain Rios Montt, or General Montt as he is more commonly known, was a general in Guatemala during the 1980s. He is notorious for his wars against the Ixil people of the mountains of Guatemala. Some argue that the military operations he ordered are tantamount to genocide; others say that he was suppressing dangerous militants that threatened the stability of Guatemala. It is up to the ICC to determine the guilt of the crimes for which General Montt stands accused of. General Montt was trained in Guatemala at an American-run military school meant to foster good relations between the two countries. As a young officer, he played a minor role in the 1954 overthrow of President Jacobo Arbenz, a leftist that was removed through a CIA-backed coup. He then pursued several unsuccessful forays into Guatemalan politics and was sent out of the country for a while. When he returned to Guatemala in the late 70’s he returned with a much more suave demeanor, which led to a large following from millions of poor Guatemalans. On March 23rd, 1982, he and several other military officers staged a successful coup, and become part of a leading three-person junta government.

Throughout the 1980s, communist guerrilla fighters were found in nearly every Latin American country. Fed up with capitalist policies that did not benefit the average Latin American, they adopted Maoism and Stalinism ideals as something that could reform troubled Latin America. By the time of General Montt’s accession to power in Guatemala, fellow Latin American country Nicaragua was already controlled by Communists. This empowered communist guerrillas in Guatemala, who desired change in their own country. However, General Montt who had just established power for himself was not about to lose it to mountain rebels, and he ordered the Army to conduct scorched-earth tactics in the villages where he suspected the insurgents were hiding amongst the every-day folk. Within his first five months in power, soldiers killed an estimated 10,000 peasants according to Amnesty International. The vast majority of these peasants killed were of Mayan descent, indigenous peoples who had lived in the area for thousands of years.

General Montt was deposed as a member of the Junta in August of 1983, ending his 17-month dictatorship, but went on to run for president two more times, and serve several terms in
Congress, ending only in 2012. As he is no longer a member of Congress, he now has no individual immunity from prosecution and can be tried for crimes against humanity.

*Special Note:* A quick internet search will reveal that General Montt was convicted for war crimes and crimes against humanity, including Genocide, in court in 2013. However, this was overturned by Guatemala’s highest court which invalidated his sentence after facing pressure from business elites. In this simulation, the ICC will try him through the ICC proceedings and under the Rome Statute.