

“JEP” – SPECIAL JURISDICTION FOR PEACE

PRESS RELEASE

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STATEMENT 149

**JEP issues first sentence for killings and forced disappearances
illegitimately presented as combat casualties on the Caribbean Coast. 5
to 8 years of special sanctions for 12 former members of the “La Popa”
Battalion**

- This is the first ruling issued by the JEP within the framework of Case 03, against those most responsible for killings and forced disappearances illegitimately presented as combat casualties by State agents during the internal armed conflict.
- The ruling sanctions five officers, four non-commissioned officers, and three professional soldiers, who belonged to Artillery Battalion No. 2 “La Popa” of Valledupar.
- The Tribunal for Peace’s Section for Acknowledgment of Truth imposed the maximum penalty of eight years on all the perpetrators, with sentence reductions granted to those who had already served prison terms in the ordinary justice system for the acts under judgment.
- The 12 sanctioned must participate in six restorative projects designed with the participation of victims, aimed at benefiting accredited victims individually, as well as communities, including indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples.
- The Section held them criminally responsible for the murder of 135 civilians in Cesar and La Guajira, who were illegitimately presented as combat casualties.

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- If further established their individual responsibility in conduct that enabled the development of a systematic macro-criminal pattern with an institutional logic.



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- In July 2025, a Public Verification Hearing was held in Valledupar, during which the Section confirmed compliance with the requirements of truth, reparation, and guarantees of non-repetition.
- The implementation of these restorative sanctions will be monitored on site by the Mechanism for the Monitoring and Verification of Special Sanctions of the Executive Secretariat of the JEP, with the support of the UN Verification Mission in Colombia.

Bogotá, September 18, 2025. The Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) sanctioned 12 members of the security forces for their highest level of responsibility in 135 murders and enforced disappearances that were falsely presented as combat casualties in northern Cesar and southern La Guajira, between January 2002 and July 2005, while serving in Artillery Battalion No. 2 “La Popa” of Valledupar.

The imposition of these sanctions by the JEP seeks to safeguard the rights of victims, provide legal certainty to perpetrators, and ensure compliance with international human rights standards. It also contributes to the reparation of victims and their communities through concrete actions with symbolic content, aimed at guaranteeing non-repetition.

At the same time, these special sanctions are expected to enable those responsible to contribute to victim reparation and peacebuilding through projects that generate real benefits for affected communities, as well as support for the social reintegration of the perpetrators. The ruling further orders various State entities to coordinate their efforts to guarantee the viability and sustainability of the projects, the safety of the perpetrators, and the fulfillment of the commitments undertaken.

The Tribunal for Peace’s Section for Acknowledgment of Truth imposed the maximum penalty of eight years on all the perpetrators, with sentence reductions granted to those who had already served prison terms in the ordinary justice system for the acts under



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judgment.

These special sanctions are granted in recognition of the perpetrators' contributions to the truth and acknowledgments of responsibility, as they make it possible to advance concrete measures of reparation and remembrance, such as dignified returns, acts to restore the good name of victims, and projects designed to transform communities and territories.

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"With this ruling, the JEP not only fulfills its judicial mandate, but also strengthens democratic legitimacy and reaffirms that peace is built upon truth, reparation, and a collective commitment to non-repetition," stated Judge Ana Manuela Ochoa Arias, president of the Section for Acknowledgement of Truth, who presided over the dialogic trial stage of this sub-case.

In turn, the president of the JEP, Judge Alejandro Ramelli Arteaga, during the announcement of the ruling, emphasized that these crimes committed on the Caribbean Coast reveal how the conflict “not only preyed upon the most vulnerable—those who never imagined they would one day seek justice—but also upon Indigenous Peoples, who, because of their difference and idiosyncrasy, became recurrent targets of stigmatization and accusations, excuses that served to enable the commission of these crimes and ensure their impunity.”

The judicial investigation documented two macro-criminal patterns:

1) (i) unlawful killings and enforced disappearances committed in the context of an alliance and collusion between members of the security forces and different fronts of the Northern Bloc of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), with the purpose of presenting those killed as combat casualties. In a few cases, there was a prior, unverified allegation that the victim belonged primarily to the guerrilla, and to a lesser extent, to common criminality; and

2) (ii) unlawful killings and enforced disappearances of persons in situations of vulnerability, who were arbitrarily detained and/or deceived by members of the “La Popa” Battalion, in order to be reported as combat casualties.

Both patterns demonstrate that the crimes under judgment were not isolated excesses, but part of a systematic plan with an institutional logic aimed at presenting false combat



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casualties to inflate military success statistics and to respond to pressure from high-ranking commanders demanding greater results in terms of casualties. This systematic practice sought to fabricate operational reports and conceal the commission of international crimes.

The victims of these crimes were *campesinos*, Indigenous people, Afro-descendants, and persons in vulnerable situations, who were surveilled, profiled,

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deceived, detained, tortured, and executed by those whose duty was to protect them. Of the 135 victims, six were identified as Afro-descendants and 14 as Indigenous. Among them, ten belonged to the Kankuamo people and four to the Wiwa people. One of the murdered women was a Wiwa minor, and another was a mother and head of household.

The Section also found it sufficiently proven that these crimes not only affected individuals and families, but entire Indigenous Peoples, who were subjected to stigmatization, persecution, and territorial control—particularly the Kankuamo and Wiwa peoples—accused of being guerrilla collaborators, confined, denied access to food and medicine, and forced into compulsory activities. Likewise, the Afro-descendant community councils Kusuto Ma Gende and José Prudencio Padilla suffered serious collective harm.

The illustrative facts also reveal a recurring modus operandi: victims were forced to wear military uniforms, stripped of their civilian identity, sometimes held for hours or days, subjected to torture, and ultimately executed. Their documents were then destroyed to hinder identification, and weapons were planted to simulate combat with the security forces. As a result of this practice, some victims remain missing to this day.

These acts constitute crimes against humanity and grave infractions of international humanitarian law, committed in a widespread and systematic manner, in a context of persecution of individuals and peoples with specific conditions and characteristics, and under an institutional strategy of concealment.

This judicial and collective truth reconstructs the social and territorial impact of these crimes on the Caribbean Coast, dismantles denialism and the narrative that they were isolated events, and provides indispensable inputs to guarantee non-repetition.

In this ruling, individual criminal responsibility is attributed to the perpetrators,



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demonstrating how each made an essential contribution to the macro-criminal pattern. That is, from their position within the military structure, their decisions, actions, or omissions contributed to the configuration of the criminal phenomenon as a whole..

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Restorative Projects

The restorative works, projects, or activities that the perpetrators must carry out in compliance with this sanction were designed with the input and considerations of the victims. The judges of the Section for Acknowledgment of Truth took careful note of their observations, particularly the knowledge and customs of the Wiwa and Kankuamo Indigenous Peoples, as well as the Afro-Colombian Peoples of the Kusuto Ma-Gende and José Prudencio Padilla Community Councils.

"Victims are at the center of this process. Their contributions and expectations are reflected in the sanctions. No measure can fully restore what has been lost or address all the demands for truth, but this ruling opens paths of dignification and restoration. It is more beneficial for the country that those responsible are not confined in prisons, where the truth and possibilities of reparation would remain locked away, but that they are required to respond to the communities through restorative actions," said Judge Ochoa Arias.

The six restorative projects selected are:

- **Integral Memorialization Plan for the Caribbean Coast:** This project includes, among other actions, the construction of a mausoleum of memory comprising 700 ossuaries with their respective tombstones in the Ecce Homo Cemetery in Valledupar, Cesar. Those sanctioned must provide support in construction, adaptation and painting; preparation and maintenance of mural areas; identification and mapping of spaces; participation in architectural and mural designs alongside the victims; support for socialization process, events and dissemination; and transcription, typing and production of pedagogical and communicative materials.

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- **Harmonization Center for the Well-Being of the Kankuamo People:** The sanctioned parties must perform land preparation and leveling; support foundations and installations for water, energy, connectivity and sanitation; equipment work; construction and maintenance of the access road; logistical support; installation of irrigation systems and preparation of productive areas; as well as participation in symbolic restorative activities.

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- **OMONAPA Integral Cultural and Memory Center of the Wiwa People:** This project includes land and material preparation; support for foundations, wall erection, installations and finishes; cleaning, gardening and outdoor adaptation; furniture assembly; planting of trees and orchards; construction of trails and signage; delivery of the cultural center; and participation in memory and socialization activities.
- **Multipurpose Urban and Rural Productive Strengthening – “Sembradores de amor y paz”:** This project consists of logistical and technical support for infrastructure works; land adaptation; fieldwork days; and participation in socialization spaces and symbolic activities.
- **Multipurpose Houses – “Sanando memorias, reconstruyendo vidas”:** In this initiative, those sanctioned must carry out carpentry, masonry, and structural adaptation work; infrastructure maintenance; logistical support for workshops, training and events; content development; participation in acts of reparation and recognition; and the promotion of socialization and memory activities.
- **Nelson Enrique Romo Romero Cultural House:** This project consists of participation in studies and designs; construction support, including prefabrication work and subsequent transfer to the construction site; installation of furniture and technological equipment; labor and logistical support; and participation in socialization processes and symbolic memory activities.

The perpetrators will begin serving their sanction with the Comprehensive Memorialization Plan for the Caribbean Coast. This project will have a security scheme implemented by the Ministry of Defense and the Sub-Directorate of the Restorative Justice System, in addition to monthly monitoring by the Comprehensive Monitoring



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The Process for the Imposition of Special Sanctions

The special sanctions imposed on these 12 retired members of the security forces are the result of an exhaustive process of investigation and judicial verification of the different elements that confirm the perpetrators’ maximum responsibility, as well as the fulfillment of the requirements necessary for the imposition of a restorative sanction.

The investigation phase of this process, within the Chamber for Acknowledgment of Truth, began in 2018 with the opening of the Caribbean Coast Sub-Case of Case 03, which investigates killings and forced disappearances illegitimately presented as combat casualties by State agents. This stage concluded in 2022 with the issuance of the Resolution of Conclusions. The case file comprises more than five hundred thousand pages. Four years of violent events were examined; hundreds of reports from victims’ organizations and state institutions were analyzed; voluntary testimonies, contrasts, and requests for information from the military criminal justice system were reviewed; and evidence was systematically analyzed. Collectively, this material enabled the attribution of maximum responsibility for crimes against humanity and war crimes to 15 members of the security forces. Of these, 12 continued on the path of acknowledgment of responsibility,

while the other three perpetrators who did not accept responsibility face a Transitional Adversarial Trial. This involves retired Colonels José Pastor Ruiz Mahecha, who served as commander of the Second Intelligence Section of the “La Popa” Battalion, and Publio Hernán Mejía Gutiérrez and Juan Carlos Figueroa Suárez, who commanded that military unit in 2002 and 2005, respectively. The adversarial trial against Publio Hernán Mejía concluded on August 5 with the closing arguments hearing; the forthcoming decision of the Absence of Acknowledgment Section will determine whether he is acquitted or sentenced to a maximum of 20 years in prison.

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From March 2023, when the Section for Acknowledgment of Truth of the Tribunal for Peace assumed jurisdiction, until the issuance of the Correspondence Evaluation order on October 21, 2024, the Section conducted a rigorous process to verify the relationship between the facts, the evidence, and the legal classification of the crimes charged to those responsible, while also assessing their contributions to the truth and their proposals for reparations to the victims.

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As part of this process, the Section adjusted the legal classification established by the Chamber and added two additional crimes—persecution and torture—which were attributed to some of the perpetrators, who in turn acknowledged their responsibility for them. During this stage, dozens of restorative practices, public hearings, and collective dialogues were held with victims, communities, Indigenous and Afro-descendant Peoples, and perpetrators in the territories where the events took place, as well as with State institutions at both the national and territorial levels.

Technical roundtables were convened with national government entities and local authorities of La Guajira, Cesar, Magdalena, and Atlántico, along with coordination processes in each municipality involved in the restorative projects ordered in this ruling. There was also a close dialogue and participation with individual victims, Indigenous Peoples, and Afro-descendant community councils, which enabled the judiciary to define the content of the restorative projects through which the perpetrators will serve their special sanctions.

In July 2025, the Public Verification Hearing was held in Valledupar, where compliance with the truth and reparation commitments by the perpetrators was verified—an indispensable step prior to the drafting and issuance of this ruling. As of the date of this ruling, a total of 252 victims were accredited in the Caribbean Coast sub-case and took part in the proceedings. They traveled from different parts of the region to attend the hearings in Valledupar, engage in restorative practices, and participate in ethically relevant notifications held in Luruaco and Barranquilla (Atlántico), San Juan del Cesar (La Guajira), and Badillo, Atánquez, and La Mina (Cesar).

This decision is issued in fulfillment of the 2016 Final Peace Agreement, which created the Comprehensive System for Peace. The JEP, as the judicial component, is tasked with investigating, judging, and sanctioning the most serious and representative crimes of the armed conflict, with the aim of upholding victims’ rights and ensuring that such events

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are never repeated.

Monitoring of Special Sanctions

The imposition of a special sanction entails a series of restrictions on rights and freedoms that those sentenced must comply with during the stipulated period. These include limitations on freedom of movement, freedom of choice,

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freedom to determine place of residence or type of work, as well as obligations to remain in designated areas, to participate in the restorative projects defined in the ruling for the established term, and to comply with the Regime of Conditionality.

To guarantee compliance, the Mechanism for the Monitoring and Verification of Special Sanctions (MMVSP) operates with three components: The Executive Secretariat of the JEP, which conducts administrative follow-up; the Section for Acknowledgment of Truth, which exercises judicial supervision; and the UN Verification Mission in Colombia, created under the Final Peace Agreement, which oversees compliance by all parties involved in implementing restorative sanctions.

This tripartite mechanism enables an immediate response to risks of non-compliance, while also providing legal certainty to the perpetrators and safeguarding victims’ rights.

In addition to verifying compliance with the restrictions imposed, the Section for Acknowledgment of Truth has the authority to revoke or modify benefits in the event of non-compliance.

Meanwhile, verification of the restorative works and activities will be carried out not only through on-site visits, but also via a monitoring system that includes electronic devices, allowing for georeferencing of perpetrators and providing further guarantees for the integrity of the process.

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I, Lina Rosas, competent official translator, and interpreter, duly registered before the Ministry of Foreign Affairs pursuant to Certificate of Professional Proficiency in Official Translation and Interpretation No. 183 (English<>Spanish) issued on July 17, 2018, by the Universidad de Antioquia, certify that this is an accurate and complete translation to the best of my knowledge, ability, and belief.
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