

First Crimes Against Humanity trial begins

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The first trial involving crimes against humanity, known as the "Los Palos" case, finally began yesterday after several delays. The Special Panel is comprised of Judge Marcelo Dolzany da Costa (Brazil) presiding, Maria Natercia Gusmao Pereira (East Timor) and Sylver Ntukamazina (Burundi).

The new Deputy General Prosecutor for Serious Crimes, Jean-Luis Gillisen (Belgium), who was sworn in on 4 July 2001, opened for the Prosecution, with a statement acknowledging the importance of this case. He said that it was an important moment not just for the East Timorese people, but also for the international community as the victims of the crimes alleged include all of humankind. The Special Panel takes part in the building of international justice, thereby helping the international community to end impunity for the commission of atrocities, he said.

The Public Prosecutor, Stuart Alford (UK), gave the Prosecution's opening statement. He outlined the nature and facts surrounding the charges, which relate to five events that occurred in various parts of Lautem district between 21 April 1999 and 25 September 1999. The seven charges of crimes against humanity include torture, forcible transfer and persecution of the civilian population, several individual murders and the murder of a group of clergy. The ten accused men were all allegedly members of the notorious Team Alpha militia.

It had originally been planned that the entire Court would visit the crime scenes in Lautem district, which is the most Eastern district of East Timor, by helicopter today, however, this visit has been postponed until later in the case.

The trial is being held in the newly refurbished court room of the Court of Appeal, rather than in the Dili District Court.