

Judges have ordered investigations into two former Guatemalan dictators - one of them the current head of the country's congress - accused of genocide in the killings of Maya Indians between 1978 and 1982.

The rulings were issued Tuesday against ex-President Romeo Lucas Garcia and his successor, Efraín Ríos Montt, by separate judges in response to criminal complaints filed by human rights groups. Ríos Montt is president of Guatemala's congress and the major force in the ruling party, the Guatemalan Republican Front. The two rulings mark the first time Guatemalan courts have agreed to investigate former dictators for atrocities committed during 36 years of civil war.

Judge Marco Antonio Posada, who ordered the investigation of the complaint against Ríos Montt, said he was aware of the historic nature of his decision. "Prosecutors will conduct a careful investigation that I will personally oversee," Posada said. "This process is extremely important."

Lucas Garcia won an election rigged by Guatemala's military in 1978 and began an anti-insurgency campaign that targeted Mayan communities thought to be sympathetic to rebel causes. Ríos Montt, who toppled Garcia's government in a 1982 coup, oversaw a scorched-earth policy that reduced hundreds of Mayan villages to ashes during 18 months in power.

The rulings stem from complaints filed May 3 by the Association for Reconciliation and Justice, which alleges Lucas Garcia and Ríos Montt used their positions to wage a "calculated war" against Guatemalan Indians. Last week, the same group teamed up with Guatemala's Center for Human Rights Legal Action to file a more specific genocide complaint against Ríos Montt on behalf of 14,000 people killed in attacks on 11 Mayan villages. A truth commission report commissioned by the United Nations in 1999 accused Ríos Montt of tolerating massacres by soldiers under his command. The report found that the retired general's offensive wiped 448 mostly Indian villages off the map.

A party spokesman said Wednesday that Ríos Montt was not familiar with the judge's ruling and could not comment. When asked in the past about genocide complaints, Ríos Montt told reporters he has "nothing to hide." Lucas Garcia, who lives in Venezuela, is reportedly suffering from Alzheimer's disease and has not made any public statement for several years.

In 1999, Nobel Peace laureate Rigoberta Menchú filed genocide charges against Ríos Montt, Lucas Garcia and six other military figures before Spain's National Court. The court rejected the case, ruling that Menchú had made

no effort to prosecute R?os Montt and the others in Guatemala. The definition of genocide under Guatemalan law is less restrictive than in other parts of the world, and includes acts that harm the mental or physical well-being of a national, ethnic or religious group.