

## Spain to help families track Franco-era victims' remains

Wed Nov 19, 2008 9:45 am ET

MADRID (AFP) – Spain on Wednesday promised to help families of victims who disappeared during the 1936-39 civil war and the ensuing dictatorship of General Francisco Franco to track their remains.

The government will "help families seeking (the bodies) all possible help they may need," said Justice Minister Mariano Fernandez Berjemo, a day after a top Spanish judge reversed his decision to probe possible crimes against humanity committed during that period.

Judge Baltasar Garzon on Tuesday said the enquiry could not go ahead as Franco and 43 of his associates could not be held legally responsible because they were dead.

He complied with a demand by public prosecutors that regional courts be handed responsibility for the excavation of mass graves thought to contain the bodies of thousands of people who disappeared during the period.

Interior Minister Alfredo Perez Rubalcaba on Wednesday underlined the state's commitment to help families of victims in their quest and spoke of "the pain of people who have not been able to bury their loved ones."

Garzon, Spain's most prominent judge, had announced on October 16 he would investigate the disappearances of 114,266 people at the request of families of the victims.

But the public prosecutor's office appealed the move, arguing it violated an amnesty agreed by political parties in 1977, two years after Franco's death, for crimes committed under the general's rule.

Garzon had last month ordered the opening of 19 mass graves, including one near the southern city of Granada where Spain's most widely acclaimed 20th century poet, Federico Garcia Lorca, is thought to be buried. He ordered four more mass graves be opened this month.

Dozens of mass graves have been unearthed in recent years but the exhumations have been organised by relatives of the victims and volunteers.

Historians have estimated that about 500,000 people from both sides were killed in Spain's civil war, which was sparked by Franco's insurgency against the democratically elected left-wing Republican government.