

# Relatives of Argentines killed in *Belgrano* sinking take Britain to human rights court

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Relatives of 323 Argentine service personnel, killed when a Royal Navy submarine sank the *Belgrano* cruiser in 1982, have filed a human rights action against the British government. The sinking marked the opening shot in Britain's war with Argentina. Lawyers for the relatives of the deceased claim that the attack violated war conventions set out in the Hague agreement of 1907, and are set to present their case to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg today.

The *Belgrano* was sunk outside a 200-mile "exclusion zone" which had been unilaterally declared around the Malvinas/Falkland Islands by the Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher. The incident recorded the first loss of life in Britain's war to retain control of the islands.

The Malvinas islands, located off the coast of Argentina, had been occupied by Britain since 1833. At the beginning of 1982 the military junta tried to restore dwindling popular support by issuing statements reasserting Argentina's historical right to the islands. By April, as Argentine troops arrived on the island, intense negotiations between Britain and Argentina were under way, led by President Belaunde Terry of Peru, when Thatcher ordered the attack on the *Belgrano* and effectively launched her cowardly war against a small oppressed nation.

The jingoist fervour created around the war enabled Thatcher to consolidate political support amongst sections of the middle class and win a second term in office. The Labour Party under the leadership of Michael Foot played no small role in facilitating this, supporting Thatcher's war in order to prove their patriotism. The sinking of the *Belgrano* became the launch pad for a chauvinist tirade about the "self-determination" of the 1,800 Falkland Islanders, and

Britain's right to occupy a territory some 8,000 miles from its shores. The media response was epitomised by Rupert Murdoch's tabloid newspaper *The Sun*, which led with the headline "Gotcha" with a picture of the sinking *Belgrano* below it.

The facts surrounding the sinking of the *Belgrano* first came to light as a result of documents leaked by a senior Ministry of Defence civil servant, Clive Ponting. The documents, which noted that the ship had been moving away from the islands, were given to Labour MP Tam Dalyell, who raised the issue in parliament. Thatcher refused to back down and maintained that the attack was a legitimate act of war. In 1994, during negotiations aimed at a rapprochement between the two countries, the Argentine defence minister said the attack was a "legal act of war".

But lawyers for the families of the dead servicemen claim that the attack's "sole purpose" was to frustrate peace negotiations at the time. Jorge Olivera said, "At no time did the Argentine cruiser enter the exclusion zone."

This account was substantiated by Dalyell, who told *The Journal* web site, "Last September I led a parliamentary delegation to Peru and we spent two hours in the house of Belaunde Terry. He confirmed exactly what I had said in 1984: the purpose in sinking the *Belgrano* 36 hours after she was first sighted by HMS *Conqueror* on a west-north-west course of 270 degrees [i.e. travelling away from the islands] was to scupper the Peruvian peace proposals."

Dalyell told *BBC Online*, "Mrs Thatcher, as she then was, did not want to be denied a military victory which was what the Falklands War was more about than helping the Falklanders."



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