(IPS) - The biggest trial for human rights crimes committed by Argentina's 1976-1983 dictatorship began Wednesday in Buenos Aires, with 68 people accused of crimes involving nearly 800 victims of the Navy Mechanics School (ESMA).

For the first time, six pilots who flew the so-called "death flights" – where political prisoners were dumped from planes, drugged but alive, into the ocean – will be tried.

The 68 defendants will be charged in cases involving the kidnapping, torture, and forced disappearance of hundreds of victims in ESMA, the regime's biggest clandestine prison centre, where some 5,000 political prisoners were held over the years.

Most of the defendants (56) belonged to the navy, and five belonged to the coast guard. But there are also former members of the army, the police and the penitentiary service, as well as two civilians: lawyer Gonzalo Torres de Tolosa and former finance secretary Juan Alemann.

Five of the defendants are fugitives from justice. The national programme for the search for wanted suspects offers a 100,000 peso (20,000 dollar) award to anyone who provides information leading to their arrest.

The case is the biggest in Argentina since the human rights trials got underway again in the past decade, after the amnesty laws and pardons protecting human rights violators were declared unconstitutional.

While the accused and their defence counsel, and the families of the victims, survivors and their lawyers took their seats in the courtroom, another stage was set up for people to follow the trial.

A giant screen was installed in the Mabel Gutierrez auditorium in ESMA, which was converted into a human rights museum after it was handed over to human rights groups in 2004.

"This will be the biggest trial so far, because of the number of victims, defendants, and witnesses," said Carolina Varsky, a lawyer with the Centre for Legal and Social Studies (CELS), a human rights group taking part in the case, told IPS.

Varsky, the director of litigation in CELS, explained that the case had come to trial in bits and pieces, which she said "hid the true magnitude of the genocide committed" in ESMA.

Progress in the ESMA case began to be made in 2007, when a single defendant, former coast guard officer Héctor Febres, was tried. But he committed suicide in his cell just four days before the verdict was to be handed down.

And in 2011, 16 of 18 defendants in another ESMA trial were convicted.

The current trial is known as the "third branch" or the "unified ESMA case".

The defendants include former navy captains Alfredo Astíz and Jorge Acosta, who were already convicted of other ESMA crimes. Acosta was also found guilty this year of involvement in stealing babies who were either born to political prisoners in detention or kidnapped along with their parents, who were later killed or "disappeared". The children were mainly raised by military or police families.

Rodolfo Yanzón, one of the lawyers for a group of 40 survivors and victims' relatives, told IPS that "we had opposed the breaking up of the cases, because we believed that it was best for the witnesses to not have to testify over and over again, and also because the (imprisoned) defendants had the right to be tried and convicted in a timely manner."

In response to such demands, and to the recommendation of a higher court aimed at expeditin

g the case
, the court where the trial is being held agreed to show filmed testimony given by witnesses in other trials against the same defendants.

One of the survivors who have most often testified is Mario Villani, a 73-year-old physicist who lives in Miami, Florida. After he was kidnapped in 1977, he was held in five different detention and torture centres, for a total of three years and eight months. ESMA was the last.

Villani was tortured and forced to carry out different tasks during his detention. He gave his testimony to the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, and testified in the trials held after the dictatorship came to an end, in the 1980s, which were cut short by the amnesty laws and pardons of the members of the military junta.

Since then he has given his testimony – about the same crimes – in trials in Argentina, France, Italy, Spain, Germany and Israel.

In an email response to IPS from the United States, Villani said he saw the start of the "mega-trial" as "one more step in the direction of justice."

He said he felt "proud" to be able to help these cases move forward. But he added that "the struggle will continue as long as there are regimes in the world that need to use torture to maintain control."

The testimony given by Villani and other survivors has helped keep the demand for justice alive for over three decades, bring the accused to trial, and identify some of the former torturers who were living their lives under other identities.

In the book "Desaparecido: Memorias de un cautiverio" (Disappeared: Memories of My Captivity), which he wrote with Fernando Reati, he said he still had nightmares. "If anyone wakes me up, I lift my arms and cover my face, in a defensive stance," he wrote.

Like other political prisoners, Villani not only suffered torture himself, but also witnessed horrendous crimes, like the murder by torture of a Jewish schoolteacher who belonged to the Communist Party, and whose name he never learned.

"He made him strip, he tied him to the table with the bottom half of his body hanging off. He shoved a stick up his anus and gave him electric shocks," he testified in the trial against federal police official Héctor Simón, alias "Turco Julián" or "Julián the Turk".

Simón, who was convicted in several cases, was known for his fierce anti-Semitism. "The f***ing Jew died. Good thing, otherwise I would have had to let him go," Villani recalls Simón saying when his victim died.

According to government figures, 14,000 people were forcibly disappeared during the dictatorship, although human rights organisations put the number at 30,000.

During the trial, which will last at least two years, three hearings a week will be held, and every seven days, DVDs will be shown, of the testimony of survivors and relatives of victims.