

3-11-2004

The Raped And Murdered Are Remembered

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "The Raped And Murdered Are Remembered." (2004). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9179>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

The Raped And Murdered Are Remembered

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Guatemala

Published: 2004-03-11

There is little to celebrate in Guatemala on International Women's Day. La Red de la no Violencia contra la Mujer nevertheless had reason to turn out in the streets for the March 8 observance. More than a thousand showed up to march. Main streets of the capital were covered in lilac, the color that represents "condolence, pain, and wounds to the spirit." Women were marching to demand, among a host of other disparities, an end to a spectacular wave of murder and violence against the women of Guatemala.

Since 2002, 1,049 women have been murdered in the country, a number far greater than that recorded for the more highly publicized cases in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico (see SourceMex, 2004-02-04). The demand is problematic. There is a contradiction in the hope of official action. The women were demanding action, but the authorities are alleged to be among the killers.

In a study of 44 cases, the victim has been identified in 21 cases, and, of those, eight are linked to police, according to Human Rights Ombudsman Sergio Morales, who noted the association but pointed no finger. Police corruption has been a constant in the political history of the country (see NotiCen, 2003-11-13).

Looking into it

On Feb. 15, UN special rapporteur Yakin Erturk had just completed a weeklong investigation into violence against women in Guatemala and, in her culminating press conference, zeroed in on the incompetence of the Public Ministry (MP) and the Policia Nacional Civil (PNC). Of 383 murders of women taken up by the MP last year, 306 are still open cases. Said Erturk, "When there exists this level of impunity, it suggests that there is violence committed by the authorities." She also pointed no finger. "We don't know who does it, why, or even if there is a pattern, for lack of investigation," she said.

But Erturk did acknowledge that the ombudsman's investigations indicate the involvement of police. "The impunity of those who cause the violence has generated more violence," she said. "There are multiple structures of power and lack of confidence in the state system." Erturk looked beyond the particulars of these cases to get a historical perspective on the murders of women and concluded that 36 years of internal war that formally ended seven years ago and the entrenched patriarchal culture that provides fertile ground for intrafamilial violence are factors in the discrimination against, and exclusion of, women.

She said, "We have seen on many occasions that sexual violence against women is used to punish whole groups and disgrace communities through the rape of their women." Erturk was drawing for her comments on data showing that, during the war, more than 50,000 women were sexually attacked. She was also relying on her recent interviews with groups of women who told her of

"violence in the home, rape, incest, and institutional violence by officers of the PNC." She found that indigenous women were the group most vulnerable to being raped.

The UN representative recommended as important to the reduction of these tendencies:

Resumption of the process of complying with the requirements of the December 1996 Peace Accords.

Bringing economic security and elimination of gender inequalities.

Passage of laws to penalize violence against women.

Thorough investigation to identify the patterns that underlie the present wave of murders. But in the shorter term, and more specifically while all those recommendations are being disseminated, discussed, approved, and perhaps someday implemented, the murders go on. As to the facts, and the patterns into which they fall, it is known that in 2003, 383 women were murdered, and to date in 2004, 41 have been murdered.

Of all complaints filed with the Procuraduria de los Derechos Humanos (PDH) for victim's assistance, 71% of the victims are women.

Of the murdered women where ages are established, 154 were between 18 and 30; 64 were between 31 and 40; 55 were between 13 and 17; and 20 younger than 12.

41.1% of the cases come from the department of Guatemala.

Most of the women were poor, most unemployed outside their homes, many were students.

The murders seemed to diminish from 42 per month to 29 per month as the media began to publish denouncements of the crimes.

The number the ombudsman found most egregious, though, was the eight deaths linked to police. On the strength of that, he has opened an investigation into what he has termed the "social cleansing of women." He has based this idea on a report concerning 65 of last year's 383 cases. Of these, 22 were sexual aggressions, 14 common violence, 13 juvenile, eight family, and eight institutional violence. These last eight are the ones for which Morales is interested in possible links to the PNC.

One of these, to illustrate, involves a woman who was traveling by car with her husband when she was kidnapped and later killed. The husband was shot but not killed in the crime and was later able to identify several police as having committed it. The witness, who is under protection, observed that there is a network of police that, in addition to kidnapping, also extorts. Furthermore, he knows that a large number of officers is involved because, during the kidnap, they passed through several police stations.

The worst of it, for Morales, is the potential and the great likelihood for the PNC to stall, hide evidence, and otherwise misdirect investigations. As evidence, he pointed to the 81.9% of the crimes among the 383 that have seen no progress. He said it is essential to "begin a process of purging the security corps to avoid more of these disgraceful acts." The police respond The police, meanwhile, serve up a different treatment of the data. They point the finger at gangs and their members, a subculture that has been the subject of harsh new suppression laws and which has become an issue in regional politics (see NotiCen, 2004-02-05).

Police data indicate 31 women have died violently this year, and more than 60% of these deaths are attributable to gangs. The rest, according to the PNC and the MP, succumbed to the consequences of drug-trafficking, organized crime, and common crime. Like the 383 before them, they died from bullets, stabbing, or strangulation. These figures come directly from investigations performed by the Fiscalía de la Mujer and the Servicio de Investigacion Criminal (SIC).

The common characteristic, the patterning factor that Erturk found elusive, was less so for the police. These women were neighbors, girlfriends, friends, or enemies of gang members. "They didn't necessarily have a relationship with a member of these groups, but some were murdered for revenge against a family member," said prosecutor Erick Galvan. Sometimes the crimes were committed, or perpetrated, by family members or former roommates of the victims. News of these 1,049 murders since 2002 might not have attracted international attention were it not for the publicity generated by a visit to Guatemala in December 2003 by Jane Fonda.

The US activist told reporters on Dec. 1, "I'm going to come back with an army of vaginas to stand beside Guatemalan women and help the world understand what's going on here." While there is some reason to expect the publicity might result in some action to halt the mayhem and find the killers, the situation at the moment, said Gilda Morales of La Red, "is inexplicable, we don't know what is happening, but the number of cases keeps growing. What is more, there is no action from the state to prevent them." Danessa Luna of the Centro de Investigacion, Capacitacion y Apoyo a la Mujer (CICAM) agreed with the dire outlook. "It looks like women will have to live in a state of siege, just surrounded by our houses," she said. "There is no interest from the state or its institutions if not to eradicate at least to control this violence." Erturk's preliminary report, issued on International Women's Day, supported the pessimism of Luna and Morales.

Presented by UN representative Birget Gerstenbert, the report says the "government is failing in its obligations to prevent, investigate, and process the cases of gender violence." As to the official version of events produced by the police, the report dismisses it, saying, "The official response to the murders of women illustrates that violence against the woman is not seen as a serious crime." Erturk's report says of the justice system, "The response of the criminal justice system is highly negligent in the majority of cases and does not provide the required protection."

-- End --