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LADB Staff

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## Corrupt Police Purged In Guatemala As Femicide Soars

by LADB Staff

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As crime escalates beyond crisis proportions in Guatemala, the police have been shown to be a significant part of the problem. The numbers of criminals and alleged criminals wearing the Policia Nacional Civil (PNC) badge is enormous. In January, the Procuraduria de Derechos Humanos (PDH) charged that 639 PNC officers were implicated in a variety of crimes during 2004.

The nation's ombud, Sergio Morales, brought the charges before Minister of Government Carlos Vielmann and to the Public Ministry. Morales said that, during the past year, the PDH opened 383 cases against the officers, alleging extortion, burglary, robbery, and murder, and moved them on to the attorney general for investigation and prosecution.

Meanwhile, the PNC fired 542 officers for corruption, kidnapping, assault, drug trafficking, homicide, and rape. There are about 22,000 officers in the PNC. "The purge is being carried out forcefully and will continue during 2005," said PNC chief Erwin Sperissen. So far this year, 18 have been fired. Sperissen said he was not surprised by the number of criminally involved cops, "if you take into account the situation the PNC is in."

The Fiscalia de Delitos Administrativos has more than 800 accusations under investigation. The way in which the cases are being handled prevents estimation of the amount of overlap. Of those fired last year, 17 are in prison. Most of the accused police, 311, were stationed in Guatemala City. Parts of the country ranking just below the capital in numbers of criminal police are: Esquintla, 60; Retalhuleu, 33; Jalapa, 26; Santa Rosa, 23; and Baja Verapaz, 19. The rest were distributed throughout the country.

One official response to the problem has been to rotate officers to other police stations. Some stations have had almost all their staff rotated, as has Comisaria 13, which covers a large part of the capital, and where most of the officers were found to be in on an extortion racket in complicity with the Policia de Transito. The transit police are a separate law enforcement organization. Guatemala may have the highest crime rate in the region, with more than a dozen murders a day in a country of 11.2 million.

### *Down the rabbit hole*

At the Government Ministry, Vielmann responded to Morales' charges by passing them on to the Oficina de Responsabilidad Profesional (ORP) for verification and cross-checking to see if any of the cases had already been processed. That move led almost immediately to charges that the ORP, far from doing verification, was obstructing the process and protecting the accused police.

Sperissen explained, "We have had problems with ORP, since on occasion they get threats from the accused police, and they backpedal for fear of reprisals." ORP has in the past returned a number of

high-profile cases to Vielmann for lack of evidence when there was in fact plenty of evidence, and it is now reportedly doing the same. When that happens, the Public Ministry drops the case. ORP recently found wanting a case against 16 police accused of operating a ring that robbed trucks and banks and committed extortion and kidnapping. A witness identified one of the officers when he went to the police station to report a robbery.

The Public Ministry blamed the ORP. Said Oscar Contreras of the Fiscalía contra el Crimen Organizado, "We asked the ORP to give us more information linking the police to organized crime, but they responded with some statistics of robberies on the South Coast, which were of no use to us." Contreras went back to ORP, this time requesting specific information and witness statements. "The ORP answered that the sources were confidential and anonymous, so more information couldn't be given," said the prosecutor.

In another incident, witness statements were deleted from reports because ORP personnel said they didn't believe them. An ORP official defended his agency to the press but declined to have his name published. He said about this particular case that the charges were weak and were made anonymously. "This is one of the reasons more information is not sent when the Public Ministry requests it." The official said that many who report crimes refuse to give their names for fear of reprisals. He accused the Public Ministry of closing cases too quickly and of blaming everything on the ORP.

### *More new cops again*

Despite the PNC's sinking reputation, aspirants lined up to fill vacancies left by the fired cops and more. The PNC is looking to fill 1,142 slots with people between the ages of 18 and 25. More than 2,000 applied, and, even after turning away half of them for "anxiety, schizophrenia, depression, aggressiveness, and a tendency to steal," a number sufficient to fill the ranks remained. The preliminary culling was just one of the measures taken to cut down on the bad apples.

Vice Minister of the Interior Silvia Vasquez said the recruits would undergo new and improved training under an entirely new cadre of trainers, using a completely new curriculum. Said Vasquez, "We expect that when they are graduated we will be able to start pilot programs with them. For instance, in Solola it is possible to replace all the officers with the new ones."

### *More women murdered*

Security has always been a critical issue in Guatemala. The PNC was the result of a postwar attempt to replace the entire national police force (see NotiCen, 1998-02-05). The uniforms changed; most of the cops did not. Perhaps chief among the critical law-enforcement issues the country now faces, one that is drawing international scorn upon the nation, is the continued and accelerating murder of women (see NotiCen, 2004-03-11). "The situation is worrisome. What more has to happen for them to pay attention to the murders of women, so that they don't become just another tragic footnote?" asked Andrea Barrios of the Centro de Atención Legal para Derechos Humanos (CALDH). Answering her own question she added, "Its not with mano dura nor with militarization that the problem of insecurity is going to be solved in Guatemala."

In January alone, 36 women have been killed, 23 by gunshot, seven by stabbing, two were mutilated, and four strangled. This compares with 14 women killed in January 2004. PNC spokesman Carlos Calju laid the causes to gang, drugs, crimes of passion, and family violence, but his agency offered no solution.

Barrios said police speculation on causes lacked the backing of competent investigation. "Before blaming a sector of society for the murders, the authorities must prove it through a serious investigation, and quit looking at this femicide as simple statistics," said Barrios. "That sector of Central American society [the gangs] cannot defend themselves against the accusations. There are no clear prevention policies. The situation is alarming, not only the murders, but also the population that is becoming indifferent to this kind of act. The murders are being seen just as statistics."

The president doesn't want to talk about it CALDH has gone higher than to the police in seeking an end to these murders. Barrios said that last July her organization asked for a meeting with President Oscar Berger to talk about security policy to stop the slaughter. They have not gotten an answer, despite the fact that the founder and former director of CALDH, Frank LaRue, is now the administration's human rights chief.

Internationally, the Guatemala Human Rights Commission (GHRC)/USA is organizing a delegation to visit Guatemala March 6-14 to militate for a solution to these killings. According to the GHRC: \* Since 2001, 1,300 women have been murdered in Guatemala. \* In 2004, the number of women killed increased by 28%, to a total of 527 deaths. \* More women have been killed in one year in Guatemala than were murdered in the past decade in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, which is grappling with its own rash of killings. \* Family members of murder victims, witnesses, and leaders of women's rights groups have received threats. \* The Guatemalan government is complicit in the terror, allocating scant resources to investigations.

The result: despite all the murders committed in 2004, just one person has been prosecuted.

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