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## European Union Blasts Central America Femicides

by Mike Leffert

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By an overwhelming margin, the European Parliament has voted to condemn the murders of women in Central America and Mexico. In an Oct. 11 vote, lawmakers gathered in Brussels officially criticized both the killings and the widespread impunity which has surrounded the crimes. The European deputies called on governments to take meaningful actions aimed at eradicating discrimination and violence against women, punishing killers and strengthening legal systems.

### *Resolution puts women's murders as item in trade talks*

Sponsored by Raul Romeva of the Spanish Green Party, the resolution requests that the member states of the European Union (EU) place the femicide issue on their agendas with Central American nations and Mexico. Moreover, the resolution offers technical and professional assistance in solving crimes. Significantly, the Oct. 11 vote sets the stage for women's murders to be an item for negotiation in any future trade accord between the EU and Central America.

The EU's democratic clause requires respect for human rights from trading partners. As a result of the vote, femicide in Mexico and Central America will be discussed at the EU-Latin American summit scheduled to take place in Lima in 2008. "We are concerned about impunity, the high number of unresolved cases," said Romeva in the wake of the vote. "We know that it is a politically sensitive issue, but nobody can remain with his or her arms crossed."

According to official numbers cited in press accounts, 4,207 women were slain in Central America between 2001 and August 2004. The murder toll included 2,374 victims in El Salvador; 1,188 in Guatemala; 442 in Honduras; and 203 in Nicaragua. In 2006, 155 murders of women were reported in the Honduran press. Some non-governmental organizations (NGOs), however, contend that the real number of victims is much higher throughout the region.

In El Salvador, some cases have involved murders of prostitutes (see NotiCen, 2005-04-28). According to Angelica Gonzalez of Guatemala's Red de la No Violencia Contra Las Mujeres, 2,400 women were murdered in Guatemala alone between 2000 and early 2006. In Guatemala, corruption in the police department has contributed to the problem (see NotiCen, 2005-02-10).

A 2005 Amnesty International Report documented housewives, professionals, students, sex workers, gang members, domestic workers, and others as among the Guatemalan victims. Mostly, the victims were young and poor. Similar to the better-publicized killings of women in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, torture and the mutilation of body parts were prominent features of many homicides.

Other murders in Central America have been attributed to domestic violence or organized crime. Aura Salazar, the secretary of Guatemalan presidential candidate Otto Perez, was slain in a

gangland-style shooting on Monday, Oct. 8. Many murders, few prosecutions Guatemala's Policia Nacional Civil (PNC) recorded at least 377 women's murders between January and Oct. 2 of this year. Among the latest killings were the gruesome Sept. 26 slayings of a mother and her three young daughters who ranged between three and nine years of age.

In other cases, women have been murdered in the presence of their children. In 2007, the rural departments of Chiquimula, Jalapa, Jutiapa and Peten have registered the highest number of women's killings. Few of the Guatemalan murders have been prosecuted. "None of the cases has been duly investigated, none of the cases has gone to court," said former presidential candidate and Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu recently. According to a 2007 report by the Women's Commission of the Guatemalan Congress, the PNC detained only 12 alleged murderers this year, none of whom has been convicted of a crime.

The murders of Central American women have slowly grabbed world attention during the last few years. While both the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and the United Nations have heard testimonies and produced reports, the EU resolution has been the strongest international action to date because of its possible linkage to economic relations. For this reason, Romeva's resolution was hotly debated and the object of "killing amendments" introduced by conservative European parliamentarians.

Concerned that EU action could hurt investments and damage public relations, high-level officials from both the Mexican federal and Chihuahua state governments mounted a behind-the-scenes lobbying effort as well as a public campaign to modify the resolution. The administration of former President Vicente Fox created a special commission to look into the cases, but nothing was ever resolved (see SourceMex, 2005-02-09 and 2006-03-09). Mexico found a ready ally in Spanish parliamentarian Ignacio Salafranca of the European People's Party (EPP), who headed a controversial EU observer delegation last year that quickly gave its stamp of approval to the close Mexican presidential election even as accusations of fraud swirled around the official results (see SourceMex, 2006-09-06 and 2006-09-20).

In a public debate last June, Salafranca contended that violence against women was "planetary" and "universal," and that it was unfair to single out Mexico. Turning to resolution sponsor Romeva, he said, "Before you set out to save the world, you should first look at your own house." Salafranca compared the Ciudad Juarez femicides to gender violence in Spain, where "150,000 complaints of physical mistreatment of women" were registered this year alone. The European Parliament is not a tribunal to judge others, Salafranca declared.

In a Sept. 11 parliamentary meeting, many of the modifying amendments proposed by Salafranca and others were stymied by the gridlock that developed between left-wing and right-wing European deputies. An anti-abortion amendment offered by Deputy Anna Zaborska of Slovakia was blocked. Still, Salafranca and his allies managed to remove a proposal to establish an EU femicide coordinator as well as a demand to identify, prosecute and punish negligent officials in Mexico and Central America. The names of two Dutch citizens murdered in Mexico, Hester Van Nierop and Brenda Susana Margaret Searle, were dropped from the compromise text but wording was retained that urged an investigation into "the cases of two Dutch women murdered in Mexico." Additionally,

the word "transnational" was removed from a section of the resolution that calls on international corporations to guarantee the safety of their women workers.

Nonetheless, the final resolution survived numerous attempts to water it down. Immediate government and media reaction to the vote was largely muted in Central America. "The (European) Parliament considers that this problem should be included in the negotiations between the EU and the region," observed Gabriela Nunez, a Guatemalan presidential secretary.

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