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High-profile Femicide Makes Headlines
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Category/Department: Guatemala
Published: 2011-11-03

In the remotest towns in Guatemala, one can find posters with the picture of an attractive 33-year-old woman and the question "Have you seen her?" The disappearance of Cristina Siekavizza, a young housewife from a wealthy suburb of Guatemala City, almost four months ago has hit the headlines and has been the most widely covered story in the media after the general elections.

Siekavizza spoke to a friend at 6:50 p.m. on July 6 and was last seen by her husband, Roberto Barreda, on July 7. Barreda claimed that he last saw his wife on July 7, when she said goodbye to him before taking a walk at 6:45 a.m. Although they lived in an enclosed residential area with closed-circuit television and private security guards who carried out regular patrols from daybreak on, no one saw her, and camera footage did not show her leaving the compound.

Friends and relatives described Siekavizza as a faithful wife, who had given up a well-paid job in a bank to become a full-time mother, and a devout Catholic who regularly attended mass. She had two children: María Mercedes, 4, and Roberto José, 7.

A special army unit searched the area where Siekavizza supposedly took exercise in the mornings with sniffer dogs but failed to find any clues.

The Fundación Sobrevivientes, a human rights group led by Norma Cruz that works to eradicate violence against women, got involved in the case and reported a series of major flaws in the investigation process.

First, the Ministerio Público (MP) waited for three weeks after Siekavizza’s disappearance to carry out a luminol forensic test in the interior of the home she shared with her husband. When the test was finally done, after much insistence from Siekavizza’s family and Fundación Sobrevivientes, traces of blood were found in one of the rooms and a duvet had disappeared, something Barreda was unable to explain.

After this evidence was found, the MP failed to perform a DNA test on Siekavizza’s family members to determine whether the blood traces found could be hers. The police also failed to use the GPS system in Barreda’s car to determine his whereabouts on the day after Siekavizza’s disappearance.

When these findings began to arouse suspicion, the court ruled that the children should be placed in the custody of Siekavizza’s parents. However, when the police arrived at the family home on Aug. 7, exactly one month after Siekavizza’s disappearance, Barreda and the two infants were nowhere to be found.

Barreda immediately became the main suspect in the case, and a nationwide search began. Cruz said that she was baffled by how Barreda could have escaped when he was supposed to be under police surveillance.

To date, the whereabouts of Barreda and the children is unknown. Although records held by the Dirección General de Migración show that Barreda never left the country, there are many blind
spots in Guatemala’s land borders with El Salvador and Mexico, which means he could be hiding in a foreign country.

After Barreda’s disappearance, the family’s housemaid Petrona Say was arrested and accused of withholding evidence.

**Former judge arrested**

As the investigation continued under intense media scrutiny and pressure from the Siekavizza family, details of the young housewife’s marital unhappiness began to emerge. Her friends and relatives described Barreda as a controlling and authoritarian man who did not allow his wife to work and forced her to remain at home as a virtual prisoner.

Although Barreda was a high earner, he gave his wife a paltry Q500 (US$63) a month for household expenses and forbade her to use the family’s four-wheel-drive car, claiming that they could not afford gasoline.

Siekavizza was allegedly so miserable that she was waiting for a friend who was a practicing lawyer to return from Costa Rica so that the friend could help her initiate divorce proceedings.

After Say was included in the protected-witness scheme, she began to reveal the spine-chilling details of how Siekavizza was allegedly bludgeoned to death by her husband after they had a furious row on July 6. At one point, Siekavizza supposedly ran out onto the balcony and screamed for help. Barreda turned up the volume on the TV to prevent the children from hearing anything.

Say also claims that Barreda’s mother, former Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) president Beatriz de León, helped him clean up the crime scene and dispose of the body.

Say said that De León ordered her to remain in the living room and watch TV while she helped her son destroy evidence, and later the mother threatened to have her killed if she went to the police. It is believed that De León used top-level connections within the Guatemalan judiciary to hinder the investigation, which accounts for the MP’s shambolic work on the case.

Based on Say’s testimony, De León was arrested on Sept. 19 and sent to the Santa Teresa women’s prison accused of obstruction of justice. However, she insists that she is innocent and claims that she is unaware of her son’s whereabouts.

Say also declared that Javier Mendizábal, a close friend and colleague, helped Barreda escape. Mendizábal was also arrested but was later released on bail.

The former housemaid also said that Barreda hired private investigator Óscar Celada (also detained and imprisoned) to help him dispose of Siekavizza’s body in the Motagua River, in the eastern department of El Progreso. A few days later, when the body appeared, Barreda purportedly received a phone call from Celada. Barreda allegedly thanked him for "getting the job done" and then lit a candle and said, "Rest in peace, Cristina."
Throughout the case, which has set off a national debate on Guatemalan society’s attitudes toward domestic violence, Norma Cruz has been praised for her relentless efforts to help the Siekavizza family and point out major flaws in the investigation.

During the first six months of 2011, 291 women and children were murdered in Guatemala, and the country’s femicide rate has increased by 183% in the past six years (NotiCen, Feb. 10, 2005 and Dec. 17, 2009). Although these crimes have become so commonplace that they rarely produce news in brief columns, the Siekavizza case sent unprecedented shock waves through Guatemalan society. Many struggle to believe that the seemingly perfect couple that appears smiling in family photos and led an apparently idyllic life in the suburbs could come to such a tragic end.

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