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Mob Lynching in Dominican Republic: When Citizens Take Justice into Their Own Hands

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June was a particularly violent month in the northern part of the Dominican Republic, with the press reporting several cases of mob lynching, persecutions, and acts of torture against individuals purportedly caught red-handed while engaging in criminal activity.

"Mob lynching has become natural and recurrent in this country," says lawyer Juan Tomás Olivero. "It’s enough for someone to yell 'he’s a thief,' 'he’s a rapist,' or 'there goes the driver who killed her' for a mob to pounce on that person and beat him to death."

In some cases, the police intervene to save a suspected criminal from being lynched. For instance, on June 26, 34-year-old Francisco Joel Crisóstomo Ramos, from the northern municipality of Valverde, was almost lynched by his neighbors after it became known that his partner had accused him of raping her two young daughters, aged 12 and 14. The authorities investigated the case, and it was proved that the 12-year-old girl had been raped and was two months pregnant.

Three weeks before, on June 6, the local media in the municipality of Santiago reported that, in less than 48 hours, three people had been lynched after they were accused of committing a series of thefts and muggings.

One of the lynchings was filmed by a passerby on his cellphone and was uploaded onto an online "news" Web site. The images show how a young man was stoned by a furious mob and beaten with metal tubes. The attack was so vicious that someone even ran over him with a motorbike. The victim was taken to the hospital with serious stomach and back injuries. In the same neighborhood, two young men who went around on a motorbike were accused of stealing and mugging. A mob beat them, but the police intervened and managed to halt the attack.

It was also reported that, in the municipality of Santiago, two youths, aged 13 and 16, were beaten to death and shot by strangers after they were caught stealing mangoes to eat. Another man, aged 25, was caught stealing a battery from a car. Witnesses said that, after the thief was caught, the owner of the vehicle, aided by three strangers, cut his hand off with a chainsaw.

In the northern part of the country, especially in the border municipalities, Haitians accused of stealing, mugging, or attacking Dominican citizens are often beaten by angry mobs.

A phenomenon known as "an exchange of fire" between the police and alleged criminals has also been reported. Many observers have referred to this as "a modern form of lynching," as these street battles are supposedly used to disguise the elimination of suspected criminals.

**Violence and the authorities**

Official homicide reports published by the Procuraduría General de la Nación (PGN) from January to March 2012 lists only three cases of mob lynching. However, there are a number of ambiguous categories such as "homicides caused by police action," "homicides caused by the armed forces,"
and "death resulting from unknown causes" that could be used to disguise lynching cases or the elimination of suspected criminals by the authorities. During the past few years, international human rights organizations have reported serious human rights violations in the Dominican Republic.

In 2007, Amnesty International (AI) reported these cases and, in its 2012 report, published in May of this year, it accused the police of committing "unlawful killings that have yet to be resolved" and details "alleged human rights violations committed by police agents." Quoting figures published by the PGN in 2011, AI states that "289 people were killed by the police and security forces, 19 more than in 2010."

Security analysts say mob lynching can be seen as a desperate reaction caused by people’s anger and anguish because of the actions committed by alleged criminals, while the unlawful killings committed by the police set a negative example as "people have learned from the police that the way to deal with criminals is to kill them."

"The 'exchange of fire' between the police and the alleged criminals is no more than a disguised form of lynching committed under the guise of a uniform and in the name of the state. The police have legitimized this sort of behavior. The police’s 'exchange of fire,' which is essentially lynching in disguise, takes Dominican society back to barbarism," says Olivero.

**Reasons behind the violence**

Crime and violence in the Dominican Republic is intrinsically linked to poverty and inequality. Despite steady economic growth under the administration of former President Leonel Fernández (1996-2000, 2004-2012), security problems remained unresolved and will be among the main issues that newly elected President Danilo Medina will have to deal with.

Although the government claims it is committed to meeting the Dominican Republic's Millennium Development Goals (MDG), reports such as the one published by Social Watch in 2012 clearly state that "the main obstacles for these goals to be reached remain the implementation of barely effective policies in crucial areas such as social investment, the redistribution of wealth, the environment, and, in particular, education."

However, Social Watch states that, "despite the progress made, the country urgently needs far-reaching social policies that bring about a real change in the country."

Valerie Julliand, UN Development Programme (UNDP) representative in the Dominican Republic, told El Nuevo Diario newspaper, "To reduce social inequality in the country, it is necessary to change the current economic and political model as the income gap between rich and poor is simply too wide." She added that disparities have increased in recent years.

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