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Ibero-American Ombudsmen Seek Regional Legislation to Combat Violence Against Children

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Representatives of 18 Ibero-American nations, meeting in Costa Rica during the 17th Annual Assembly of the Federación Iberoamericana de Ombudsman (FIO), agreed to push for all countries in the regional bloc to pass legislation to fight violence against children—the meeting’s main topic.

The idea is to review legislation, where it exists, and to promote it in countries where it does not, as a means to penalize child aggression, Defensoría de los Habitantes spokesperson Ahmed Tabash told NotiCen. "They agreed to analyze countries’ laws in order to somehow promote that violence against children be declared a crime in all countries," Tabash explained.

In Costa Rica, "There is legislation" on this, but during the two-day meeting held at a luxury hotel outside San José, the Central American nation’s capital, it was pointed out that "they don’t have specific laws, but they have general legislation, which is included in their Penal Code," added the Defensoría official.

"They said [in such cases] it was difficult that parliament, or Congress, would pass legislation creating that crime," Tabash pointed out. "So, they agreed to call on all countries in the bloc to review their legislation and see whether it’s possible to typify a specific crime on the issue of violence against children."

Participants urge cooperation with UN effort

Participants in the FIO assembly also agreed to promote the organization joining the UN's campaign UNiTE to End Violence against Women, an effort to prevent and eliminate all forms of aggression against women and girls throughout the world.

Launched in 2008 by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, UNiTE is a seven-year, five-goal initiative aimed at bringing together women’s organizations, governments, civil societies, youth movements, along with the UN system, to address what is deemed a global pandemic of violence against women and girls.

Its official description says goals include adopting and enforcing national laws to address and punish all forms of violence against women and girls, adopting and implementing national action plans, strengthening data collection on the prevalence of violence against women and girls, increasing public awareness and social mobilization, and addressing sexual violence in conflict.

Assembly decisions were sent up for review to the FIO’s Consejo Rector, which in turn will draw up the assembly’s declaration. Once approved by each country’s ombudsman, probably this month, it will be delivered to governments for action.

When she announced the FIO assembly at an Oct. 17 press conference, Ofelia Taitelbaum, head of Costa Rica’s Defensoría de los Habitantes, said, regarding the declaration, that the organization's
wish was that "all our governments throughout Latin America, throughout Ibero-America, welcome our suggestions for better caring for children and teenagers and for action to be taken on this."

Taitelbaum also referred to what she described as widespread violence against children, especially in Central America, where one of three children have no house or it is in a deplorable state, one of five have no access to drinking water, one of seven lack proper health care. "We have 16% of this population badly nourished, while 13% of these children have never been to school," she further pointed out.

Costa Rica’s problems examined
Referring to Costa Rica, a country whose population is just over 4.3 million—of which 1.1 million are in the 5-17 age group—Taitelbaum said the situation is less critical than in the rest of Central America, "although it’s worrisome...because of some of the things that are happening in our country, and we can’t ignore them. One such thing is child labor, another is abuse, ill treatment, violence in homes, in schools, another is child trafficking. This we can’t ignore, we have it right here, unfortunately."

Taitelbaum added that, nevertheless, "I must tell you...the country has moved forward, there’s no doubt many things have been done."

The public Hospital Nacional de Niños (HNN) says that aggression against minors in Costa Rica rose 11% during the first six months this year compared with the same period last year. HNN data also indicates that cases of child victims of aggression treated at the hospital skyrocketed from 365 in 2000 to 1,500 in 2009.

A week after the press conference, the country’s top human rights official told her colleagues attending the assembly’s opening ceremony that violence against minors is a global social epidemic, and she underlined that all countries have a duty to legislate against it.

"All our countries have the duty to create laws that both guarantee boys’ and girls’ well-being, health, and full development and ban all forms of violence whatever the social context," Taitelbaum said. "In so doing, we take one of the most decisive and firm steps in the comprehensive attention and protection of our boys and girls. We are facing a scourge with social-epidemic characteristics that is not exclusive to a particular country or region."

In Taitelbaum's view, there must be "absolute intolerance to any type of violence against our boys and girls."

Interviewed by NotiCen during the assembly, Mexican human rights exert Guadalupe Cabrera pointed out that, worldwide, the challenge is that no country has managed to rid itself of this social phenomenon, because none has fully honored the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Passed in 1889 by the UN and in force since 1990, the convention "refers to five principles: children’s participation in decisions concerning them, maximum protection, no discrimination, looking after their superior interest, and adequate development," said Cabrera, a member of Mexico City’s Comisión de Derechos Humanos. "In this regard, many of our countries have made a lot of progress in one or two of the principles set in the convention," but not in all of them.