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LADB Staff

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Human Rights Lawyer to Coordinate Probe of Women Murders in Juarez

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2003-10-22

President Vicente Fox has appointed human rights lawyer Maria Guadalupe Morfin Otero to coordinate the federal government's investigation into the deaths of hundreds of women in Ciudad Juarez during the past 10 years. Authorities have counted more than 230 deaths since 1993, but some human rights activists and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) say at least 300 young women have been killed in the past decade.

The international human rights organization Amnesty International (AI) said it had documented 370 murders in the last decade. In most cases, the victims were employees of maquiladora factories, store clerks, or middle- and secondary-school students.

Interior Secretary Santiago Creel Miranda said Morfin's appointment is a signal of the Fox administration's intention to solve the murders. Morfin is former director of the Comision Estatal de Derechos Humanos de Jalisco. "Her appointment fulfills distinct social needs: judicial knowledge, experience in the defense and promotion of human rights in this country, and social sensitivity," Creel told reporters.

Morfin promised to devote her full attention to her tasks but also cautioned against expecting immediate results. "It would be irresponsible at this time for me to guarantee that we would resolve the problem 100%," she told reporters.

As part of her preliminary assignments, Morfin has been asked to implement a 40-point action plan to end the abduction and murder of women in Ciudad Juarez and the capital city of Chihuahua. Her office will also seek to create working relationships among federal investigators and law-enforcement authorities from Juarez and Chihuahua state, and to create liaisons with the families of victims and with nongovernmental organizations.

The administration has faced strong criticisms in this case, first for remaining on the sidelines (see SourceMex, 2003-03-04) and later for failing to produce results after deciding to enter the investigation in July of this year (see SourceMex, 2003-07-30).

After a visit to Juarez in early October, a team of six investigators from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime said most of the murders had not been solved because authorities had not devoted sufficient resources and had used faulty techniques in the investigation. The investigators, who conducted the assessment at the invitation of the Mexican government, recommended that Mexico create a manual for police on preserving crime-scene evidence and a set of standards for investigating homicides.
"Scarce resources have prevented adequate, modern investigations, and the most modern investigative techniques cannot be applied because of financial or legal limitations," said Eduardo Buscaglia, leader of the UN team. US congressional delegation offers help Morfin's appointment followed strong criticisms from outside observers about the lack of progress in the cases.

**US legislators visit Juarez**

In August, AI published a report criticizing the various law-enforcement agencies involved in the investigation as incompetent and corrupt. AI representatives later accompanied a delegation of US legislators on an investigative tour of Juarez. The delegation found that the families of the victims were very angry. "They've gotten nothing, worse than nothing, lies, confusion, cover up, so they are angry," said Eric Olsen, a US member of AI. The US delegation comprises Reps. Hilda Solis (D-CA), Luis Gutierrez (D-IL), Silvestre Reyes (D-TX), Ciro Rodriguez (D-TX), Louise Slaughter (D-NY), Sheila Jackson (D-TX), and Corinne Brown (D-FL).

Solis, who headed the delegation, said US legislators were planning to seek a more detailed explanation from the Fox government about the role of Morfin and the commission formed to support her work. Solis pledged greater support from the US government in the case. "From this day forward we promise to bring this matter before the Congress of the United States," said Solis. "We are also going to address it at the Department of State." She acknowledged, however, that the role of the US Congress would be limited. "We recognize we have a limited role, but we will look to provide more technical support with the identification of the victims," said Solis.

The Mexican Congress has also pledged greater involvement in the case. The Mexican Senate appointed a special commission to monitor the results of the investigations. The commission is made up mostly of women legislators from all parties, including Dulce Maria Sauri and Martha Tamayo of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), Luisa Maria Calderon and Micaela Aguilar of the conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), Leticia Burgos and Micaelman Ramirez of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), and Sara Castellanos of the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM).

In the Chamber of Deputies, the equality and gender committee (Comision de Equidad y Genero) not only pledged to follow the results of the case, but also to extend the investigation to other regions where several murders of women remain unresolved. PRI Deputy Diva Hadamira Gastelum Bajo, who chairs the committee, said an effort would be made to have the investigation extended to cover a series of unresolved cases in Sonora, Guanajuato, and Mexico City. (Sources: Associated Press, 10/08/03; La Jornada, 10/08/03, 10/09/03; Agence France-Presse, Spanish news service EFE, 10/13/03; The Dallas Morning News, 10/14/03; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 10/08/03, 10/10/03, 10/17/03; Reuters, 10/13/03, 10/17/03; Notimex, 10/12/03, 10/17/03; The Herald, 10/06/03, 10/13/03, 10/14/03, 10/20/03; El Universal, 10/13/03, 10/21/03; Milenio Diario, 10/21/03)

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