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Local, State Officials Blamed for Lack of Resolution to Juarez Women Murders

by LADB Staff

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President Vicente Fox's government is placing most of the blame on the Chihuahua state government for the lack of resolution to the deaths of hundreds of women in the border city of Ciudad Juarez. The conclusion, the result of a six-month investigation by special prosecutor Maria Lopez Urbina, blames dozens of state and local officials for mishandling the investigation into the deaths of nearly 400 women in Juarez since 1993. Many of the women were employees of maquiladora factories, although some victims were also store clerks and secondary-school students (see SourceMex, 2002-09-11).

In January of this year, Lopez Urbina was appointed to head the newly created Fiscalia Especial para la Atencion de los Homicidios de Genero en Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua (see SourceMex, 2004-02-04). She was the second woman appointed by the Fox government to a high-level position in connection with the Juarez cases. I

n October 2003, the Fox government designated human rights activist Guadalupe Morfin to coordinate investigations into the Juarez murders (see SourceMex, 2003-10-22). "There was notorious inactivity and negligence...that led to the loss of evidence and the inadequate protection of crime scenes," Lopez Urbina said in a press conference revealing the results of her report. "The forensic results were riddled with grave problems of validity and trustworthiness."

Authorities investigate 81 officials

Mario Alvarez Ledezma, deputy attorney for human rights, said Lopez Urbina's office examined the performance of 167 state and local officials in investigating the cases and concluded that 81 of these officials had not taken the investigations seriously or ignored clues that could have provided resolution in some cases. "Never in the history of the Juarez cases has a prosecutor's office determined that 81 public servants were responsible for hindering the investigation process," said Alvarez.

Alvarez said state prosecutors were weighing criminal abuse of power charges against those officials, a crime punishable by up to eight years in prison. Fox, who was present at Lopez Urbina's press conference, said his administration would take the results seriously. "To the parents, brothers and sisters, children, or husbands of these women who were unjustly deprived of their lives, we promise our best effort to make the expression 'not one more death' a reality," the president said.

The Fox government entered the investigation in March 2003, focusing its attention on a half-dozen possible motivations for the murders. These include satanic ritual killings, organ trafficking, and rumors that recruiters and teachers at a computer school or drug traffickers may be responsible for the deaths. Only the organ-trafficking theory has been dismissed. Following the release of Lopez

Urbina's report, the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) asked Chihuahua authorities to begin criminal investigations into several dozen officials allegedly involved in the negligence.

The PGR initially did not identify any of the officials by name or party affiliation, but said their cases would be investigated and their files handed over to Chihuahua authorities for possible criminal prosecution or administrative sanctions. Later reports said eight state prosecutors who served during the administrations of former Gov. Francisco Barrio and current Gov. Patricio Martinez are on the so-called black list, which also includes law-enforcement officers, forensics experts, state investigators, and investigative supervisors. All but a handful of these individuals are no longer in their positions, the PGR said.

The report also suggested that authorities had detained and wrongly imprisoned some suspects who did not have anything to do with the deaths and disappearances of the Juarez women. The PGR said it would pursue the release of these individuals. Finally, the report urged that the federal investigation be expanded to include unsolved murders of women in Chihuahua City, the state capital. Human rights groups offer mixed reactions. Reactions of Mexican and international human rights groups to the report were mixed.

The harshest criticism came from Jose Luis Soberanes, president of the Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH), who called the report "a catalogue of good intentions." He said he doubted that only 81 officials were involved in the cases. "[Lopez Urbina] said that the data she used only goes back to 2001," said Soberanes. "Therefore, I believe we will see even more names added to the list."

Just days before the report was released, Soberanes called the situation in Juarez the "most serious human rights problem" in Mexico and said, as did the later report, that state and local authorities were becoming obstacles to a resolution of the problem. "The inefficiency, irresponsibility, and negligence of local authorities is a scandal," he said during testimony before a special congressional commission.

Soberanes did not, however, let federal authorities off the hook. He noted that a handful of deaths have occurred since Guadalupe Morfin was named to lead the investigation in October 2003. "New deaths have been registered without there being any advances toward clarifying them," said the CNDH president. "Where is the prevention?"

In the US, the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) described the report as inconclusive. "The problem in Juarez is more than whether or not a serial killer is on the loose," said WOLA spokesperson Laurie Freeman. "It's the prevailing attitude that violence against women is acceptable. That attitude is what has led to hundreds of unsolved murders of women in the past decade."

Amnesty International (AI) offered a slightly more positive but still cautious reaction to the report. AI director Eric Olson said he was encouraged that authorities had decided to investigate wrongdoing by state and local officials, but he also raised concerns that the investigation was being

left in the hands of Chihuahua prosecutors. "It is a little worrisome that they're asking the state attorney general, who has been compliant here, to look into this," said Olson.

Olson agreed that official attitudes toward domestic violence might be a principal reason behind the inadequate investigations. "The problem is the government of Chihuahua dismisses those cases as crimes of passion and does not properly investigate when there are reports or a likelihood of domestic violence," he said. "We don't think they should be treated any different."

A group of women legislators in the Chamber of Deputies said it will push for Congress and the administration to take more specific actions that not only address the problems in Juarez but also domestic violence at the national level. Deputy Marcela Lagarde of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) said she and other legislators are working for the creation of a special program known as the Plan Nacional para Erradicar la Violencia hacia las Mujeres to begin to address the issue at a deeper level.

The program is going to need funds, which the legislators said should come from the additional oil-export revenues that Mexico has earned from this year's higher-than-anticipated global prices for crude oil. "It costs money to expand protection for the human rights of women," said Lagarde. "In Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, and other places, the cost has been increased by the abandonment of the rule of law." (Sources: El Sol de Mexico, Spanish news service EFE, 06/02/04; Reuters, 05/26/04, 06/03/04; Agence France-Presse, 06/03/04; The Dallas Morning News, 05/30/04, 06/04/04; Unomasuno, 06/02/04, 06/04/04; El Universal, The Washington Post, 06/04/04; Notimex, 06/03/04, 06/09/04; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 06/01/04, 06/03/04, 06/07/04, 06/08/04, 06/10/04, 06/14/04; Associated Press, 06/03/04, 06/14/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 06/01/04, 06/04/04, 06/15/04; La Cronica de Hoy, 06/04/04, 06/11/04, 06/15/04; La Jornada, 06/15/04; Milenio Diario, 06/16/04)

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