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President Vicente Fox's administration, while downplaying its failure to resolve the murders of hundreds of women in Ciudad Juarez, has taken additional steps to address the situation. In late May, the administration made two announcements that imply a stepped-up effort to try to bring some resolution to the murders.

On May 26, the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) announced that it would assume a direct role in the investigation of all the murders that have taken place since 1993. Some estimates indicate that close to 400 women have been murdered in Juarez in little more than a decade, including 18 cases in 2005. A few days later, the PGR removed Maria Lopez Urbina, the special prosecutor assigned to investigate the murders, and replaced her with Mireille Roccatti Velazquez, a former president of the Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH).

Critics call PGR's intervention a publicity stunt

The PGR's decision to intervene in all the Juarez cases represents a shift for federal prosecutors. The administration had taken the position that Chihuahua state authorities were responsible for all but a handful of the investigations (see SourceMex, 2004-06-23 and 2005-02-09).

The PGR's decision is in part the result of strong pressure from human rights advocates and organizations representing relatives of victims, as well as a change in leadership at the PGR. In late April, Fox appointed Daniel Cabeza de Vaca to replace then attorney general Rafael Macedo de la Concha, who resigned because of fallout resulting from the effort to oust Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (see SourceMex, 2005-05-04).

Human rights advocates questioned the Fox administration's true intentions regarding the involvement of the PGR in the Juarez cases. "This appears to be a publicity stunt on the part of this government," said the Red Nacional de Organismos Civiles Todos los Derechos para Todos, which represents 54 human rights organizations.

Edgar Cortez, executive secretary for the organization, said the announcement might have been a reaction to strong criticism from the international human rights organization Amnesty International (AI). In a report released in May, AI said human rights violations were still commonplace in Mexico despite some efforts by the government to bring Mexican law in line with international standards on human rights.

But the report, which also criticized the judicial and legislative branches for their shortcomings in protecting human rights in Mexico, raised concerns about continuing reports of arbitrary detentions, torture, abuses in the judicial system, and murders of human rights advocates and journalists.
The report made a special mention of the lack of resolution in the Juarez murders, a responsibility ascribed primarily to the executive branch. "The victims are being betrayed by this government, which had made a commitment to defend them," said the AI report. "This is not the first time that the government has resorted to a 'rapid response' when faced with criticism [from Amnesty International], about the continuation of impunity in Juarez," said Cortez.

**Removal of special prosecutor elicits mixed reactions**

In a second announcement relevant to the Juarez case, Cabeza de Vaca removed Maria Lopez Urbina from her post. She was appointed in early 2004 to investigate and prosecute the Juarez cases (see SourceMex, 2004-02-04). Lopez Urbina came under criticism from victims' families because of the lack of results in the investigations. Just two days before her demotion, two major human rights organizations the Comision de Solidaridad y Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (COSYDDHAC) and the Comision Mexicana de Defensa y Promocion de los Derechos Humanos (CMDPDH) made statements sharply criticizing the Fox government for failing to fulfill a commitment to guarantee an end to violence against women in Mexico.

The groups said this lack of commitment was evident in the failure to resolve the Juarez cases. Lopez Urbina's efforts had focused in part on scrutinizing Chihuahua state and Juarez officials accused of willful neglect in the investigations. She had promised to investigate all 143 officials accused of neglect, but managed to obtain only two convictions. The daily newspaper El Diario in Ciudad Juarez reported that Lopez Urbina made some enemies among the elected officials she had investigated. When she left her post, she was facing 27 legal complaints charging her with abuse of power and defamation.

Lopez Urbina's ouster was criticized by legislators from the special committee (Comision Especial) on the Juarez murders created in the Chamber of Deputies. Deputy Marcela Lagarde, who chairs the committee, said Lopez Urbina was being made a scapegoat for the administration's failures. "There is no coherence in the government's policies, there are no comprehensive actions," said Lagarde, a member of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD).

Deputy Blanca Gamez, a member of the governing center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), questioned whether the change was merely cosmetic. "We are not sure what the true motives are for these changes, whether they involve a change in personnel or a change in policy." Gamez went on to accuse the administration of failing to communicate with Congress about the investigations. "Our committee has received no information about a resolution of any of these cases," said Gamez. "If [Fox's office] has any information, they should pass it on to us."

Cabeza de Vaca responded to the criticisms by pointing to the need for a change in the position but also praising Lopez Urbina for scientific and legal advances made during her 15 months in office. "She performed well, but the citizens are demanding quicker results," said Cabeza de Vaca. Lopez Urbina was replaced by Roccatti, who served as president of the CNDH during the administration of former President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000). The Senate, which took over the process of selecting the head of the CNDH in 1999, decided not to retain Roccatti because of questions about her performance as head of the human rights commission (see SourceMex, 1999-11-17).
Fox administration sources say they selected Roccatti as special prosecutor because of her commitment to resolving the Juarez murders. As CNDH director, Roccatti recommended that the Chihuahua government follow up on the Juarez murders, but her recommendations were ignored. Roccatti’s office is expected to build on the advances implemented under Lopez Urbina, but will place a stronger focus on human rights when conducting the investigations, said Cabeza de Vaca.

**Fox in hot water for comments about news coverage**

While the PGR was making the changes in the structure of the Juarez investigations, the Fox administration issued conflicting statements criticizing the news media for its coverage of the murders. First, PGR director of human rights Mario Alvarez Ledesma accused the news media of failing to report positive results achieved by Lopez Urbina and special commissioner Guadalupe Morfin Acosta in some of the Juarez investigations.

Ledesma’s comments were followed by a contradictory statement by President Fox, who chided the news media for "recycling" news about the Juarez murders. The president said that most of the Juarez cases had been solved and many of the perpetrators were already behind bars. "We must pay attention to the situation in Juarez, but it must also be seen in its proper context," said Fox. "These murder cases have already been resolved." Fox’s statements elicited strong criticism from a cross section of Juarez residents, including organizations representing victims’ relatives and business leaders.

Residents were especially angry that the president would make such a statement only weeks after two young girls were sexually assaulted and murdered in Juarez. "It pains me once again that Vicente Fox is denying what happened in Ciudad Juarez and trying to bury the facts," said Norma Andrade, president of Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa, an organization created by the mothers of many of the victims.

Gabriel Flores Viramontes, director of the Juarez chapter of the Camara Nacional de la Industria de Transformacion (CANACINTRA), said the president’s comments were counterproductive. "We must recognize that the problem continues, and the results of the investigations are not what had been expected," said Flores Viramontes. "The president's comments were unwarranted."

CNDH president Jose Luis Soberanes pointed to inconsistencies between the president's statement and the appointment of a new prosecutor for the Juarez murders. "This president offers us a contradiction," said Soberanes. "First he tells us that the cases are resolved, and then he appoints Mireille Roccatti as the new lead investigator to assume those same cases." This is the second time within a few weeks that controversial statements by Fox have inflamed strong passions.

In a discussion about immigration issues with business leaders in Texas in mid-May, Fox angered US African-American leaders. "There is no doubt that Mexicans, filled with dignity, willingness, and ability to work, are doing jobs that not even blacks want to do there in the United States," Fox said.

The president later told reporters he regretted the manner in which he made the statements and invited prominent African American leaders Rev. Jesse Jackson and Rev. Al Sharpton to meet with
him in Mexico City. Rev. Sharpton criticized Fox for failing to make a full apology for the statement.

Fox spars with Congress about anti-crime legislation The lack of resolution to the Juarez murders
is just one of the manifestations of what appears to be an out-of-control wave of criminal activity in
Mexico. Drug-related murders have escalated in recent months in Sinaloa and Tamaulipas states.

As was the case with the Juarez murders, Fox has criticized the media for "sensationalist" coverage
of the crime situation in Mexico. "It is important that the international and the Mexican media
understand that these are localized cases and that this does not reflect the general situation in our
country." The issue of crime has been the cause of friction between the US and Mexico. Earlier this
year, the US State Department issued an alert warning US travelers to avoid Mexican cities near
the US border because of an escalation in drug-related violence. This warning prompted an angry
response from the Fox administration, which accused the US of interfering in its internal affairs (see
SourceMex, 2005-03-09).

Still, the escalation in violent crime from kidnappings and bank robberies to drug-related murders
remains a thorn in the side of the Fox government. Administration officials have reluctantly
acknowledged that drug-related violence has reached many corners of the country, including the
maximum-security federal prisons (see SourceMex, 2005-01-12). "The problem is real and cannot be
ignored," said presidential spokesman Ruben Aguilar Valenzuela. "This is going to be a prolonged
effort." In comments to reporters, Aguilar noted that Attorney General Cabeza de Vaca and Public
Safety Secretary Ramon Martin Huerta were preparing a strategy to intensify the fight against crime.

Fox later added fuel to the fire by ascribing responsibility for the increase in crime in Mexico to
senators from the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the center-left
Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). The president accused those senators of blocking
his anti-crime bill (Ley de Justicia y Seguridad), which, he said, would have empowered the
administration to take more effective anti-crime actions. "I hold Congress responsible, the senators
and deputies of the PRI and the PRD, for not having approved the bill," Fox said in an address to an
insurance-industry convention. Opposition legislators from both chambers of Congress immediately
criticized Fox for making misinformed comments. They noted that the justice committee (Comision
de Justicia), which was in charge of ensuring that the anti-crime bill came to the floor of the Senate,
is presided over by PAN Sen. Jesus Galvan Ochoa. "This is a desperate president suffering from
schizophrenia," said PRD Deputy Angelica de la Pena Gomez. "There is a lack of consistency with
him and with his party."

Deputy Manlio Fabio Beltrones, floor leader of the PRI delegation in the lower house, accused
Fox of blaming the Congress for the shortcomings of his administration. "The fight against crime
does not depend so much on the creation of new laws as on the application of those that already
exist." [Sources: CNN, 05/15/05; Associated Press, Agencia de noticias Proceso, 05/25/05; Notimex,
05/26/05; La Cronica de Hoy, 05/24/05, 05/25/05, 05/27/05; Spanish news service EFE, 05/23/05,
05/26/05, 05/30/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 05/30/50; Reuters, 05/23/05, 05/31/05; El Financiero,
La Jornada, 05/24/05, 05/26/05, 05/31/05; El Universal, 05/24/05, 05/27/05, 05/31/05; La Crisis, 05/24/05,
05/26/05, 05/27/05, 05/31/05; The Herald-Mexico City, 05/24/05, 05/27/05, 05/31/05, 06/01/05; El Diario
(Ciudad Juarez), 05/30/05, 06/01/05]

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