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Reports Show Poor Human Rights in Region

by LADB Staff

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The year 2000 was not a good one for human rights in Central America, according to year-end reports from human rights organizations and the annual evaluation by the US Department of State. Although some regional governments disputed the assessments, especially in the State Department report, the *Comite para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (CODEH)* and other groups agreed that the situation had not improved overall. In a review of the year, the *Inter Press Service (IPS)* found a consensus among human rights organizations that poverty, corruption, crime, impunity, and other factors that contributed to human rights violations had increased.

Celia Medrano, general coordinator of the *Comision de Derechos Humanos de Centroamerica (CODEHUCA)*, told IPS, "There was no real political will among leaders in the region to enforce respect for human rights." A report last year by the *Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)* said violent crime in El Salvador and Guatemala placed them among the five most violent countries in the world and that the region as a whole was the most violent, with an average murder rate nearly twice as high as twenty other Latin American countries the IDB had studied. Furthermore, the inability of police forces and courts to curb violence has resulted in an increase in vigilantism, especially in Guatemala, where more than 200 lynchings were reported last year.

The State Department report said only about one-third of those lynchings cases ever went to trial in Guatemala. A *United Nations Development Program (UNDP)* study showed that violence in Costa Rica had reduced the life expectancy of males by an average of four months. While many human rights abuses are linked to poverty, crime, and failures in the justice systems, some organizations also mention US policy as a contributing factor.

Manuel Jimenez of Panama's Human Rights Commission said the US-backed Plan Colombia, ostensibly aimed at drug eradication (see *NotiSur*, 2000-07-14), could exacerbate the violence against civilians in Panama's Darien province on the border with Colombia. "We believe the United States has undertaken a campaign to draw the Panamanian government, which has remained neutral with respect to the Plan Colombia, into the strategy," he told IPS. Attacks on civilians by Colombian guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries in Darien antedated Plan Colombia (see *EcoCentral*, 1997-05-01), but Jimenez says the increased violence there in recent months gives the US a pretext to pressure Panama to cooperate with its policies.

US report says states generally respected rights

The State Department report on human rights around the world, which Congress requires each year, generally gives Central America a favorable rating. For each Central American country, the report opens with the statement, "The Government generally respected the human rights of its citizens, however, serious problems remained in some areas." Costa Rica is regarded as having

the best record in the isthmus, but the State Department reported serious abuses in such areas as domestic violence, slow judicial proceedings, police brutality, and physical abuse by prison guards.

Equal rights for women were lagging, and child labor and child prostitution were "a growing problem." The report noted the existence of "insult laws" used by government officials to intimidate the press (see NotiCen, 2001-02-22). Government officials dismissed the report as unsubstantiated and said it failed to take into account recent improvements made in treatment of prisoners and in other human rights areas discussed in the report.

The Ministry of Justice issued a statement arguing that the US was not in any position to judge the prison system of other countries because of failings in its own system. At the other extreme, the report rated Guatemala and El Salvador considered to have the worst records in the region as generally good but with a longer list of serious abuses. In El Salvador, there were extrajudicial killings and kidnapping by police officers, abuse of prisoners, and allegations of police abuse of street children.

Besides police misconduct, the report said the judiciary was inefficient and corrupt and that impunity was rampant in the system. It referred to a recent scandal in which hundreds of judges were said to have bogus or no law degrees. To illustrate the effects of impunity, the reports cited the case of legislator Francisco Merino of the Partido de Conciliacion Nacional (PCN) who, while drunk, fired a pistol at a police officer wounding her. The Legislative Assembly refused to cancel his legislative immunity so that he could be prosecuted.

Other areas of weakness were violence and discrimination against women and disabled people, child abuse, child labor, and child prostitution. Even before the US report came out, human rights organizations in Guatemala said the situation there had worsened during 2000. The State Department report and local human rights reports covered much of the same ground, mentioning police misconduct, unresolved murder cases, police use of torture, and mistreatment of prisoners. While Guatemalan prosecutors were able to get convictions in a few human rights case, most failed to move through the courts because of corruption, intimidation of witnesses and judges, and judicial inefficiency.

A report from 40 Guatemalan human rights organizations said their groups had received 90 threats and had their offices and homes searched by police. The report also noted 190 extrajudicial executions during the year and described the first year of President Alfonso Portillo's administration as a step backward in the prevention of physical and other abuses. The report listed extrajudicial executions that it classified as cases of "social cleansing," plus the disappearance of three people associated with social movements, the assassination of two environmentalists and two union members, and of other journalists, campesino leaders, and others engaged in social activism.

Mario Polanco, director of the Guatemalan Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (GAM), said, "This year, the human rights situation worsened at all levels in Guatemala, especially in the areas of civil and political rights." The organization told IPS that it had recorded 300 death threats to activists last year. All the major reports mentioned the failure of the government so far to resolve the assassinations of anthropologist Myrna Mack and Bishop Juan Gerardi.

In Nicaragua, the State Department report mentions the same kinds of abuse by police and failure of the justice system to combat corruption and impunity. Nicaragua also suffers from criminal bands composed partly of former combatants in the armed conflict of the 1980s, who operate with some impunity in the north and in the Atlantic Coast region.

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