

GUATEMALA - Violence Against Women Unchecked and Unpunished (Manuel Bermúdez, IPS)

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SAN JOSÉ, Nov 25 -(IPS) - Hundreds of people marched through the streets of Guatemala City Friday to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, painting X's on judicial buildings and security agencies to protest the failure to protect women and bring the perpetrators to justice.

"An average of 14 or 15 murders a day are committed in Guatemala," human rights prosecutor Sergio Morales told IPS, noting that so far this year, 560 women have been slain, and not a single murderer has been convicted.

Guatemala's homicide rate is among the highest in Latin America, one of the most violent regions in the world.

"Since 2001, the phenomenon has grown in both quantitative and qualitative terms, because these murders are accompanied by extreme violence, which aggravates the victims' suffering," by contrast to male murder victims, who are almost always killed by firearms, he explained.

Civil society groups, meanwhile, complain about the justice system's failure to investigate the murders of women.

"We are seeing a setback with regard to the rights of women, not only in terms of the killings, which are the most brutal expression, but also with respect to all kinds of violence against women, which the state justifies and tolerates," activist Andrea Barrios told IPS.

Barrios belongs to the Centre for Legal Action on Human Rights (CALDH) and the 25 de Noviembre Coordinator, an umbrella group of more than 30 organisations.

Morales said that "unfortunately, our justice system has been incapable of bringing to trial and punishing those who planned or committed the more than 1,600 murders of women that have occurred in the past four years."

Citing a statement by the office of the prosecutor of crimes against life, he said that "of the 2,400 cases it was handling, it was only investigating 40."

The report "Guatemala: No protection, no justice: Killings of women in Guatemala", released by the London-based human rights group Amnesty International in June, states that the alarming increase in the number of killings of women is compounded by impunity, weak laws, and a firmly entrenched "machista" or sexist mindset.

On the eve of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, Amnesty International called for protest demonstrations in front of the Guatemalan embassies in Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela.

The international rights watchdog's aim was to draw attention to the violence facing women in Guatemala, which has some of the most severe levels of gender-based violence in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In the past three years, the total number of murders of women climbed from 383 in 2003 to 527 in 2004 and 560 so far this year.

Domestic violence is to blame for a portion of the murders, as indicated by police statistics, which show that 33 percent of the victims were somehow related to their murderers.

The authorities maintain that the expansion of youth gangs known as "maras" in Central America is also linked to the atrocious crimes committed against women, whose bodies are often found with signs of torture or mutilation.

But both Barrios and Morales say that while the maras are one factor contributing to violence against women, they are not the most important one.

Morales noted, for example, that the gangs do not move the bodies of their victims to other locations after killing them, and they do not use torture.

To do so would require a degree of logistical organisation that the gangs simply do not have, "but the government uses the maras as an excuse to divert attention away from the fact that it is not living up to its responsibilities," said Barrios.

Morales and Barrios stressed that there are criminal elements in Guatemala who are widely known to have a well developed organisational base and to purposely send out a message through inhuman acts that contribute to their goal: terrorising the population in order to ensure their impunity. This is essentially the modus operandi of the military and the paramilitary death squads that sowed terror throughout Guatemala during the 1960-1996 civil war.

Countless women were raped, mutilated and tortured by army troops, with similar methods to those being used today, Barrios emphasised. .

The 1996 peace accords established specific commitments for the defence of women, noted Barrios.

"We want the government to live up to its responsibility, since it has ratified the Inter-American Convention to Prevent, Punish and Eradicate Violence Against Women, and international treaties take precedence over national legislation, where we still have certain gaps," she added.

For her part, psychologist Vilma Ovalle from the Asociación Mujer Vamos Adelante (literally, "Women, let's go!") stressed that continued impunity for these crimes against women is the main factor behind their rise in recent years.

She also pointed to the practice of stigmatising the victims by claiming that they are members of the maras or sex trade workers, in order to escape responsibility for clearing up the real causes behind the murders.

"Although we are somewhat pessimistic about the situation because of the general deterioration of the social fabric, there have been some advances, given that there are more organisations and greater support for women to come forward and report these crimes," said Ovalle.

In the meantime, Alba Estela Maldonado, a lawmaker and former rebel fighter from the leftist Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity, is heading up a commission that is currently touring Europe to draw attention to the serious situation of violence against women in her country.

In her book, *Femicide in Guatemala: Crimes Against Humanity*, Maldonado exposes the institutional weaknesses that have allowed the brutalisation of women to continue unchecked and unpunished.

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