

Guatemala: Murders of Women Recall Counterinsurgency Techniques

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MEXICO CITY, Jun 22 (IPS) - "*Death to the bitches, I'm back*" read a sign found next to the body of one of the nearly 1,700 Guatemalan women who have been murdered in the past five years.

The worst waves of brutal, unsolved murders of women in Latin America have been seen in Ciudad Juarez, on Mexico's northern border, where close to 400 killings have been reported since 1993, and Guatemala, where 527 women were killed last year alone.

Congresswoman Alba Maldonado told IPS that it is especially alarming that the methods used in the murders in Guatemala, an impoverished Central American country of 13 million, are reminiscent of those employed against the guerrillas and the residents of rural indigenous villages during the 1960-1996 civil war.

The lawmaker, who belongs to the former insurgent Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) party, also noted that one-quarter of the nearly 200,000 people killed during the armed conflict - mainly by the security forces - were women.

Although peace agreements were signed in 1996, Guatemalan society seems to have lost its sensibility and to have suffered a grave deterioration of values, which stands in the way of combating the violence against women, said Maldonado, who underscored not only the large numbers of victims, but also the cruelty with which they are murdered.

The 527 victims of what women's rights groups call "*femicide*" accounted for 12 percent of the total number of people killed in Guatemala in 2004.

In the view of Guatemalan Ambassador to Mexico Arturo Soto, the murders of women are the result of an explosive cocktail in which soaring crime rates, drug trafficking and the proliferation of youth gangs known in Central America as "*maras*" combine with cultural aspects like a male-dominated society and domestic violence.

In addition, women have begun to play a greater role in the commission of violent crimes, and are also the victims of the settling of scores between rival gangs, Soto told IPS.

What is needed to check the violence, he said, are policies focusing on education and prevention, as well as stepped-up judicial cooperation with Mexico and the rest of the countries of Central America, in order to prevent criminals from escaping punishment by moving freely across the region's porous borders.

Soto said he does not believe the origins of the killings that have been denounced by local and international human rights groups can be traced back to the civil war.

But Maldonado argued that the demobilisation of thousands of former members of the security forces without any programme for their reinsertion into society and readaptation to civilian life, along with the fact that an estimated two million firearms are in the hands of the civilian population,

are factors that play a significant role in the wave of brutal murders of women.

After the peace agreements were signed, thousands of former members of the security forces joined the police or were hired by private security companies, said Maldonado, who pointed out that many of those who took part in the counterinsurgency campaign were trained in sadistic methods of utterly destroying the enemy.

Several former combatants who joined the national police have, in fact, committed attacks on women using their old counterinsurgency tactics, said the congresswoman.

"As a society, we have yet to acknowledge what happened during the war, and we must seek a way to heal the wounds, in order to combat this culture of violence," added Maldonado, a lawyer.

To illustrate the atrocities committed during the counterinsurgency war, she recalled that soldiers often cut open the wombs of pregnant women and hung the fetuses up in trees or smashed them against rocks.

During the counterinsurgency campaign, which largely targeted indigenous villages, thousands of women were the victims of mutilations and sexual violence similar to what some of the more recent murder victims have been subjected to.

Non-governmental organisations like the Network for Non-Violence Against Women have documented cases of girls and women killed in recent years whose bodies have shown signs of gender violence: hands tied together with barbed wire, fingernails torn off, decapitation, rape, and messages tattooed or written on their bodies, like *"vengeance"*, *"one less bitch"*, or *"you have paid, bitch"*.

Hilda Morales, an activist with the Network, told IPS that Guatemala *"is caught up in a culture of violence, which the state has been unable to curb. There is terror, mainly among families who live in slums and poor neighbourhoods, where the highest murder rates are found."*

"The calls for help from the mothers and the demand for an end to the murders seem to have no effect on the government," which *"disregards the work of civil society organisations, and merely tells us that there are no funds for so many groups, as if we were simply asking for a job,"* said the activist.

Morales said the victims' families often keep silent out of fear or the conviction that nothing will be done, because the public prosecutors office tends to place little importance on the murders and often ignores new evidence that crops up, while failing to carry out in-depth investigations or follow up on cases.

In addition, she said, it expresses views that would seem to *"justify"* the crimes if the victim was a sex worker or if she was killed by gang members or drug traffickers.

A report released earlier this month by the London-based human rights watchdog Amnesty International, *"No protection, no justice: Killings of women in Guatemala"*, urged the government of Oscar Berger to investigate the murders with a *"gender focus"*, create mechanisms to search for missing women and girls, bring the culprits to justice, adopt prevention programmes and bring Guatemalan legislation into line with international conventions on violence against women.

A year ago, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, an Organisation of American States (OAS) body, criticised the scant resources that the Guatemalan government has dedicated to the prevention and punishment of these murders.

Legislators from Guatemala, Mexico and Spain will meet at the end of the month in Guatemala to make progress towards the creation of an interparliamentary network against "*femicide*".

"We have a long way to go. We have begun to work but it seems that our call for an end to these murders is falling on deaf ears. But all of this should awaken sensibility in a society that has not yet reacted with indignation to the cruelty of these killings," said Maldonado.

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