

FEMICIDE IN GUATEMALA

by Risa Grais-Targow

As the United States and the rest of the world focus their attention on the Middle East, atrocities are taking place in other regions of the world unnoticed by the international community. The violence that ravaged Latin America during the 1980s is not over. A wave of violence is taking place at this moment in Guatemala that is unknown to most of the world. The targets are young women between the ages of 15 and 26, and the murders are taking place primarily in or around the nation's capital, Guatemala City. The pattern of violence includes sexual assault and physical torture before the women are killed and left in public places. In a country fraught with residual violence from its thirty-year civil war, murders are not front-page stories. This is particularly true when the victims are women, who are not valued by paternalistic Guatemalan society.

In the past three years nearly 1,500 young women in Guatemala have been murdered. Already this year, 257 women have been murdered, with the perpetrators going unpunished.¹ In the Mexican border towns of Ciudad Juarez and Chihuahua, a similar pattern of violence against women has caught the attention of international human rights groups and non-governmental organizations. According to a new report by Amnesty International, 370 women have been murdered in Mexico during the last ten years.² Among the responses to the international press on the Mexican killings is a new resolution in Congress (H.Res 466), which calls for the United States government to work with the Mexican authorities in an effort to solve the cases.

Remarkably, though the murder toll in Guatemala is far greater than that of Ciudad Juarez, the violence there has been ignored by the international press and non-governmental organizations alike, and the killings continue. It wasn't until February of 2004 that the United Nations began to pay attention, sending Special Reporter Yakin

Erturk to Guatemala to investigate the so-called “femicide” taking place there.

The violence against women is reflective of a broader Cold War legacy that haunts the region. After a CIA-backed coup removed democratically elected Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz from office in 1954, the nation experienced a succession of highly repressive dictatorships, all of which were financially backed by the United States. During the late 1970s and 1980s, the U.S. gave millions of dollars to the Guatemalan right in an effort to suppress the leftist guerrillas, whom the U.S. considered to be Communist. President Ronald Reagan feared that if one Latin American nation fell to Communism then the surrounding nations would become Communist. Therefore, a great deal of foreign aid was given to the Latin American right in an effort to stop such a “domino effect” from occurring.

In Guatemala, the Mayan indigenous people were among those considered a Communist threat, after many joined with the Left to demand greater social equality and equal land distribution. The state responded to these demands with widespread violence. According to the Commission for Historical Clarification, 200,000 Guatemalan people were killed or disappeared during the armed conflict. Of this number, 83% of the victims were Mayan.³

After Guatemalan guerrillas and the military signed a peace accord in 1996, the United States and the international community assumed that Guatemala was at peace. This assumption, however, is far from accurate. The violence that was previously targeted at the internal Communist enemy has not disappeared but instead has been displaced. The new targets are the weakest sectors of society: women, especially indigenous women.

The murder of Guatemalan women is tied to the racism, paternalism, and corruption that has taken root in Guatemalan culture. Professor Marcia Esparza of John Jay College was part of the 1998 UN Truth Commission on Guatemala, and since then has devoted much of her time to working with indigenous female communities in Guatemala and Mexico. Esparza suggests that levels of impunity are connected to the corrupt hidden powers in Guatemala. In her opinion, these cases are not being resolved because there is no political will. It is simply not in the interests of the Guatemalan oligarchy to investigate these crimes and punish the perpetrators.

Over half of Guatemala’s population is indigenous, yet the indigenous people have a long history of marginalization within the country. The historical legacy of oligarchic land ownership in Guatemala remains intact, with a very small percentage of the population owning the land. The unequal land distribution has increasingly forced indigenous people to migrate to urban areas in order to survive. One of the most popular destinations for urban workers is Guatemala City, where factory jobs are available, particularly in *maquilladora* factories that are notorious for hiring only young women. Not coincidentally, Ciudad Juarez in Mexico is also the home of *maquilladora* factories. Professor Esparza suggests that the “femicide” is tied to the movement of indigenous labor into the city. “Many women are uprooted from the rural areas, their communities, and families and migrate to urban areas for work. Once they migrate, they have no support network, and they become even more open and vulnerable to violence.”⁴

Another factor contributing to this continuation of violence is the inability of the justice system to investigate the crimes and convict the perpetrators. In Guatemala, resources are scarce, with only a small percentage of state funding allocated to the Justice Department. This may be one explanation for the lack of investigation into the murders. Of the 383 murders committed in 2003, 306 are still awaiting investigation results.⁵

When the crimes first began, the police simply blamed the usual suspects: the youth gangs, known as the *Maras*. While it is highly probable that some of the murders are gang-related, new investigations are pointing to state actors as well. It is only recently that the widespread corruption of the National Civilian Police (PNC) has begun to be considered part of the problem. The Human Rights Ombudsman, Sergio Morales, affirmed in March 2004 that many of the crimes are connected to organized crime circles that include the PNC and the army.⁶

In a recent report issued by the Guatemalan Mutual Support Group (GAM), a Guatemalan human rights organization, Director Mario Polanco suggests that not only are the police and army responsible for these crimes, but that the social cleansing is an attempt to “create chaos in the country and generate more ingovernability and fear.”⁷ The murders have created an environment of fear, with many women scared to leave their homes. Maintaining an environment of fear gives those in power an excuse to exert more control. UN Special Envoy Yakin Erturk came to similar conclusions after her February 2004 visit to the country. In a press conference, she suggested, “When these levels of impunity exist, it seems that there is violence being committed by authorities.”⁸

Sadly, as long as the international community ignores Central America and the problems there, the crimes against women in Guatemala will most certainly persist. Even with international attention, they may not stop. Without it, however, there is little hope for the victims-to-be.

This article was written in July of 2004. At the time, the average number of women killed a month was 41.

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1 Prensa Libre “Dan Muerte a Cuatro Mujeres” by Julio Lara. July 2, 2004

2 www.amnestyusa.org/women/juarez

3 Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) report, 1999.

4 From interview with Professor Marcia Esparza of John Jay College, February 2004.

5 Prensa Libre February 15, 2004.

6 Guatemala Human Rights Commission/ USA Human Rights Update June 1, 2004.

7 Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA Human Rights Update June 1, 2004.

8 Prensa Libre February 15, 2004