

GUATEMALA:
Women's Lives Are Worth Nothing, Say Anti-Violence Activists

José Eduardo Mora

SAN JOSE, Dec 23 (IPS) - Luz Marina Aragón, a 44-year-old Nicaraguan woman, was murdered and chopped into pieces, which were put into plastic bags and cardboard boxes and scattered around Guatemala City. While her case is especially gruesome, it is just one of the 489 murders of women reported in Guatemala this year.

Statistics provided by the Women's Protection Unit of the Guatemalan Attorney General's Office place the Central American country, with a population of 12 million, at the forefront of the rest of Latin America with regard to the number of female murder victims, ahead of Honduras with 171, El Salvador with 96, and Colombia with 297 so far this year.

"As women, our lives are worth nothing in Guatemala," lawmaker Alba Estela Maldonado of the leftist Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) told IPS.

The number of murdered women is even more frightening in view of the fact that it reflects an increase of 106 violent deaths in comparison with last year.

But there is a slim chance of more effective policies being adopted to ensure women's safety and protect their rights, Maldonado added.

According to Regina Fonseca of the Women's Rights Centre in Honduras, the situation is similar in her own country. "This is an issue of no interest to the government and other circles of political power," she said.

The panorama is bleak throughout Central America, where human rights groups and other civil society organisations predict an increase in violence against women in 2005, in keeping with the trend observed in recent years.

The lack of specific government policies to address this matter and the impunity surrounding these crimes are the main factors behind these alarming rates of gender-based violence, said Maldonado.

"Despite all of the murders committed in 2004, only one person has been prosecuted, which demonstrates the impunity that prevails in our country," she added.

Last year, with a total of 383 women killed, only two perpetrators were tried and sentenced.

A lack of awareness and concern on the part of society and high rates of poverty and unemployment are also factors that contribute to a climate conducive to horrific crimes

against women in Guatemala, Maldonado noted.

Many observers believe that the high rate of violence in the country, which particularly affects women, is a consequence of the civil war that tore the country apart from 1960 to 1996, as the army and paramilitary forces attempted to quash the left-wing guerrilla insurgents.

The war left some 200,000 dead and over 50,000 "disappeared", the great majority of them unarmed indigenous people in rural areas.

Violence against women has grown steadily over the years, as evidenced by the death toll of 303 in 2001 and 317 in 2002.

Maldonado said that one of her main objectives as a member of Congress is to give greater "visibility" to the tragedy that affects the daily lives of the country's women, yet is practically ignored by both the government and the public.

A study by the Mutual Support Group (GAM), a local human rights organisation, revealed that most of the women murdered in Guatemala were also raped, tortured or dismembered. Many were killed by their husbands or partners.

According to the research study, the main causes behind these crimes are domestic violence, which accounts for 21 percent, youth gangs or "maras", representing 20 percent, and drug trafficking, linked to another 20 percent.

In Maldonado's view, the government of President Oscar Berger has given no signs of interest in remedying the frightening vulnerability of Guatemalan women.

The murder victims have all been between the ages of 16 and 36, and the vast majority are from the poorest sectors of society. In addition, most of the cases have been concentrated in Guatemala City, the capital.

"When we report these crimes, there is still a sector of society that reacts with a 'counterinsurgency' mentality and claims that the figures have been falsified. This is the typical response of our machista, patriarchal society," said Maldonado.

The government's failure to adopt policies aimed at curbing violence against women is reflected in details like the fact that the bodies of female murder victims are often picked up by the fire department, as opposed to the police, Maldonado noted.

This is a task that should fall to law enforcement agencies, who ought to be investigating the crime scenes in an attempt to solve the crimes, she underlined.

The state-run National Coordinating Agency for the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Violence Against Women (Conaprevi) is provided with no funding whatsoever to combat gender-based violence, according to the non-governmental Guatemalan Network

to Stop Violence Against Women.

For his part, Guatemalan Human Rights Ombudsman Sergio Morales accused the Ministry of the Interior of being completely incapable of providing adequate security for the country's citizens, and especially its women.

"The state has violated the human rights of women, because the security forces have not succeeded in curbing the high rates of crime, and there have been no effective policies adopted to eradicate violence," said Morales.

The Special Prosecutor's Office for Women acknowledged that up until November of this year, it had received 9,420 reports of violence against women.

For Fonseca, the main problem is that the tragedy of these murdered women remains "invisible" for most of Central American society.

"The most difficult part of the struggle we are waging is that women in the region are fighting alone, because this issue is of no interest whatsoever to our political leaders, or the business community, or even the Catholic church, which could help a great deal if it denounced these crimes," she maintained.

This year in Honduras, there were 21 more women murdered than in 2003, when 150 violent deaths were reported.

"In Honduras there is a law against domestic violence that is applied only sporadically in the cities, and is completely unheard of in the rural areas," Fonseca noted.

She added that all of the country's law enforcement and security efforts are focused on fighting the "maras" or gangs, which means that an issue as important as the appalling vulnerability of women is completely cast aside.

"Violence in general is very widespread in our country, but it is the misguided actions of the males in authority, combined with factors like high alcohol consumption, that contribute to the murders of women by men," Fonseca stated.

In Costa Rica, although the number of women murdered decreased from 29 in 2003 to 19 in 2004, the National Institute for Women is still unhappy that a bill to criminalise violence against women, which it sponsored, has yet to be voted upon by Congress after a five-year wait.

The bill, which passed an initial debate Dec. 15, will have to be submitted to a constitutional review demanded by the Libertarian Movement, which represents the Costa Rican far right in Congress and is fervently opposed to the proposed legislation.

The bill establishes prison sentences of 20 to 35 years for murders of women, and supporters believe it will serve as a deterrent against gender-based violence.

In the meantime, violence against women is also a serious concern in El Salvador.

The Prudencia Ayala Feminist Coalition of El Salvador has called on the government to adopt policies that will counteract the "machismo and misogyny" that allow the murders of women to continue unabated.

Given the increase in violent deaths this year, women in Central America will undoubtedly be forced to fight even harder in 2005 against the vulnerability they suffer, and the struggle will be especially vital for women in Guatemala, where terror and impunity reign. (END/2004)