

Mothers Step Up Justice Campaign as a Cover-Up Takes Hold

By Kent Paterson | November 24, 2004

Like other mothers, Patricia Cervantes has heard the promises sung like empty lyrics by a chorus of presidents, governors, and law enforcement authorities. Their reassuring words vow to end impunity and find justice for the murdered daughters.

Cervantes, whose 19-year-old daughter Neyra was raped, tortured, and murdered last year in Chihuahua City, has seen authorities defile her loved one's case to such an extent that someone even put a man's skull on Neyra's skeleton in order to make it appear that a full body had been recovered. She's watched in horror as Chihuahua state police officers picked up her nephew David Meza and then—according to the young man's account—tortured him into falsely admitting to killing Neyra. Speaking to reporters in Ciudad Juarez, Cervantes had a simple message: She wants her daughter's real killers caught. "We don't want words, we want action."

Little has changed in the cases of Neyra Cervantes and the more than 400 women and girls who have been murdered in Ciudad Juarez and Chihuahua state since 1993, according to Amnesty International and press accounts. Dozens more remain missing. About 100 of the victims are thought to have been killed by serial rape murderers. Still, police have arrested no credible suspects in the serial killings, while widely believed scapegoats like Meza remain locked up in jail, and new murders stain an already bloody landscape.

Chihuahua's new governor, PRI member Jose Reyes Baeza, took office on October 3 and was immediately confronted with the femicide issue as a top priority. He appointed a woman, Patricia Gonzalez, as new state attorney general; met with the relatives of murder victims; reshuffled law enforcement and women's services personnel; renamed the organized crime-linked Chihuahua State Judicial Police, and vowed to "lower impunity and clean up the security forces."

But things have not gotten off to a good start for the governor. Within hours of his inauguration, a woman's body was discovered in Chihuahua City. In the next several weeks, 6 other women and girls were killed in Chihuahua City and Juarez. Some of the latest killings follow a previous pattern, when changes in government or public events related to women's rights have been

accompanied by the discovery of new bodies. As if a macabre message were being delivered.

A victim recovered on November 25, the International Day to Eliminate Violence Against Women, has been tentatively identified as Martha Cecilia Vargas, a mother of two who disappeared last August after leaving home to search for work in the maquiladora industry. If the victim's identity is confirmed, the Vargas murder would be the latest example of how authorities have underplayed the true number of missing/murdered women in the borderlands. The young mother's name was not on an official list of 35 disappeared Juarez women released by federal and state officials earlier in November.

A Caravan for Justice

With justice nowhere in sight, Patricia Cervantes and other victims' relatives embarked on a mega-tour of 54 U.S. and Canadian cities in October. Dubbed the International Caravan for Justice in Juarez and Chihuahua and co-sponsored by the Mexico Solidarity Network and numerous local groups, members of the Juarez-based *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa* (Return Our Daughters Home) and the Chihuahua City-based *Justicia para Nuestras Hijas* (Justice for Our Daughters) spoke to thousands of people, ranging from high school students to seniors, and appeared on local news shows. They testified before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) in Washington, DC and met with U.S. congressional representatives.

In Las Vegas, New Mexico, the mayor proclaimed a day of solidarity, and new ground was broken when the New York City council passed a resolution promising to disinvest its money from companies that have maquiladora plants in Juarez if they do not do more to protect their workers. For caravan participants like Marilu Garcia, whose 17-year-old sister Lilia Alejandra, was raped and murdered in Juarez in 2001, the tour was bittersweet. "I would have liked to have a caravan for a reason of happi-



ness,” said Garcia. “It’s shameful that family members have to join a caravan in this way and go to other countries to ask for justice, because they don’t get it in their own country.” After arriving home on October 31, the traveling mothers had their photos involuntarily snapped by officers with the Federal Investigations Agency (AFI), and some activists reported being followed by the Juarez city police in the days afterward.

The Mexican Government Drops the Ball—Again

Already an international scandal, the unresolved murders of young women in Chihuahua not only call into question the Fox administration’s human rights record, but threaten the very premise of governance as well. In Juarez, “the rule of law is broken,” flatly states federal PRD deputy Marcela Lagarde, the president of the Mexican Chamber of Deputies’ femicide commission.

Fed up with the way the Chihuahua State Attorney General’s Office (PGJE) has long mishandled the murder cases, activists last year pressured President Fox into assuming a greater federal role. He named the former head of the Jalisco State Human Rights Commission, Guadalupe Morfin, as the new Commissioner for the Prevention and Elimination of Violence Against Women in Ciudad Juarez. The President then appointed Maria Lopez Urbina special federal prosecutor. It was widely expected that Lopez Urbina would immediately launch a criminal investigation in search of the murderers.

But one year later, the federal record is beginning to resemble the state one. Although Lopez Urbina’s office located some of the missing women alive, it has not detained any serial murder suspects or assigned many new cases to federal investigators. Reviewing old state files, the special prosecutor singled out 129 former and current PGJE officials for negligence and possible prosecution for omission of duties. Lopez Urbina then turned their names over to the PGJE—the same agency whose personnel were accused of committing the violations in the first place—for legal action.

The new PGJE administration has suspended about 20 of its officials, but several have avoided prosecution through legal maneuvers. Notably, Lopez Urbina did not mention two past Chihuahua governors, Francisco Barrio of the National Action Party (PAN) and Patricio Martinez of the PRI, or any of the numerous state attorneys general and Juarez district attorneys as bearing any responsibility in the botched investigations. All the individuals identified by Lopez Urbina were

mid- or lower-level officials, and a dozen of them have filed defamation charges against the special prosecutor.

Former Prosecutor for Women’s Homicides in Ciudad Juarez, Zulema Bolivar, one of the officials identified by Lopez Urbina for alleged negligence and the current assistant director of the Juarez city jail, created a scandal of her own in November when she declared that her previous superiors, ex-State Attorney General Arturo Gonzalez and former Juarez District Attorney Jose Manuel Ortega, had irregularly yanked her off a notorious 2001 case in which 8 women were found murdered in the middle of Juarez. Two bus drivers are widely suspected of being framed up by the PGJE for the crimes. While Bolivar’s declarations signify that her supervisors might have engaged in far more than negligence, neither man was named by Lopez Urbina in her recent reports. Asked by the local press if Bolivar’s statements would be investigated, Chihuahua State Attorney General Gonzalez said legal impediments prevented her from doing so. Meanwhile, Ortega continues to work as legal director of the PGJE.

The nonprofit Washington Office on Latin America criticized Lopez Urbina’s record so far, noting that the same deficient files she used to identify alleged state law enforcement violations were the basis for statements downplaying femicide. Indeed, Lopez Urbina’s murder statistics are far short of the probable number of victims, who are sometimes omitted from the death toll, according to eyewitness and family versions. For instance, on September 23, 2002, the day ex-Governor Patricio Martinez was in Juarez to inaugurate an ill-fated inter-institutional commission to address the murders, the body of 26-year-old Ericka Perez was tossed onto an empty lot.

The same day Perez’s body was found, the skeleton of another suspected murder victim was found behind a maquiladora plant. Also, Juana Sandoval vanished. Four months later, she was found raped and murdered along with two other victims.

Initial police versions in the media reported that Perez had been raped and murdered by strangulation. Then-State Attorney General Jose “Chito” Silva quickly proclaimed that Perez had succumbed to a drug overdose, and her death was not placed in the official femicide roster.

An unemployed maquiladora worker and former employee of the Instituto Mexico private school, Perez disappeared after leaving home to look for work, according to the victim’s mother, Elia Escobedo. The distraught Escobedo now must care for Ericka’s two children on wages earned from washing and ironing clothes.

Scapegoats Rot Away

Although the Mexican government claims to uphold international human rights agreements disallowing torture, the continued imprisonment of various suspects in the serial murders despite the lack of any hard evidence against them suggests otherwise, because the judges won't admit recantations as evidence. Besides David Meza, other suspects include U.S. citizen Cynthia Kiecker and her Mexican husband Ulises Perzabal. Both claim they were savagely tortured. The couple is currently being tried for the 2003 murder of 16-year-old Viviana Rayas in Chihuahua City, and a decision in their case is expected very soon.

Then there is bus driver Victor "El Cerrillo" Garcia. Detained with fellow driver Gustavo Gonzalez in 2001 for the murders of 8 women, Garcia and Gonzalez accused members of the Chihuahua State Judicial Police (PJE) of torturing them. Gonzalez's lawyer, Mario Escobedo Jr., who complained to colleagues that he was threatened to abandon the case, was later shot to death by PJE officers led by the same commander who had allegedly overseen the detention and torture of the bus drivers. Cleared by a judge, the commander, Alejandro Castro, then went on to work for a while in security at the federal government's anti-corruption ministry in Mexico City. In 2003, Gonzalez himself mysteriously died in a Chihuahua prison before ever receiving a sentence.

Commissioner Morfin gives credence to reports by the United Nations, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, National Human Rights Commission and Amnesty International that suspects including Garcia have been tortured into confessing to crimes they did not commit. Morfin's office has promoted the application of the Istanbul Protocol, a rigorous method of documenting torture, in confirming suspects' claims. Earlier this year, Morfin secured Garcia's transfer back to a Juarez jail from Chihuahua City and set up interviews with PGR personnel to verify the suspect's torture allegations under the Istanbul standard.

But Morfin's efforts were shot down last month when Chihuahua Judge Gustavo Munoz Gamboa, ignoring both the pending application of the Istanbul Protocol and the lack of any hard physical evidence against Garcia—handed the man a 50-year prison sentence for murder.

The Specter of a Cover-Up Looms Large

With both state and federal efforts mired in chaos, there are several lines of investigation about who is actually responsible for the femicides that merit further investiga-

tion. Leads include a network of private computer schools, bars, and businesses operating in both the downtowns of Juarez and Chihuahua City; police officers from different agencies; drug traffickers; wealthy businessmen; politicians; immigrant smugglers; El Paso residents; and elements within the PGJE—the same law enforcement agency supposedly probing the women's murders.

"They're all in this up to their necks, in the murders and kidnappings," charges Evangelina Arce. Frustrated at state inaction, Arce began her own investigation into the 1998 disappearances of her daughter Silvia and a friend, Griselda Mares. She sniffed out a trail that led to two Federal Judicial Police officers as the probable culprits. The men have not been detained, but Arce says she has been under surveillance by Chihuahua state police, beaten up on the street, and hit by a car since speaking out.

Another unpursued lead concerns Hector Lastra, a former PGJE official who was arrested last February on charges of running a prostitution ring of underage teenage girls. Denying the accusations, Lastra was quickly released on bail. Reportedly, Lastra pressured teenage girls working at Juarez fast food restaurants into having sex with prominent businessmen. Clients were allegedly offered catalogues with photos of the girls, whose age and physical appearance resembled those of previous serial killer victims. At a meeting with the Mexican Chamber of Deputies femicide commission in Juarez last month, attorney Lucha Castro, who represents family members of murder victims, said that two of the girls who lodged charges against Lastra denounced that the ring had been taking minors from Ciudad Juarez to the Chihuahua City campaign headquarters of the current Chihuahua governor. Commissioner Morfin, whose office has repeatedly spoken out about the gravity of the Lastra case, earlier requested protection for the family members of the girls involved.

Activists Move Forward

Undaunted, victims' relatives and women's activists are pressing ahead with a multi-pronged struggle. Lawyer Lucha Castro plans to press on with cases filed with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights that accuse the Mexican government of violating the rights of the victims and their family members. In the United States, activists are supporting resolutions in the House and Senate, sponsored by Rep. Hilda Solis (D-CA) and Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-NM), respectively, that would offer greater U.S. technical assistance to the investigations and formally put the femicide issue on the agenda of bilateral U.S.-Mexico relations.

In Mexico City, a group of academics and activist have formed Grupo Alternativas, issuing specific recommendations to assign federal jurisdiction to all the murder cases and put one autonomous, unitary law enforcement agency in charge. The plan will be considered by the Mexican Chamber of Deputies femicide commission, according to commission president Marcela Lagarde. Additionally, the femicide commission intends to review a rash of women's murders in other Mexican states besides Chihuahua, among others, Sonora, Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Guanajuato.

During the last week of November, dozens of mothers of murder victims traveled to Mexico City to meet with government officials including President Fox and attend anti-femicide demonstrations in the capital city. Among their demands were renewed calls for the federal government to take over the murder investigations; the release of political prisoners, and the installation of 4,000 video security cameras in Juarez. While Fox instructed his cabinet members to work more closely with the mothers, Norma Ledesma, the mother of a 16-year-old computer school student raped and murdered in Chihuahua City in 2002, was quoted as stating that she was "more disappointed than ever" in the government's response to the femicide. A separate, unsuccessful attempt to meet with Fox's wife, Martha Sahagun, likewise prompted denunciations by the mothers. According to Norma Andrade, Lilia Alejandra Garcia's mother, she and her other daughter, Marilu, were detained by police for three hours outside the Mexican White House, Los Pinos, after trying to enter to deliver a petition. Complained Andrade: "the victims are treated worse than the responsible parties and murderers of this femicide."

Some say the Mexican government's time ran out a long time ago. Chihuahua City women's activist Graciela Ramos,

who works with *Mujeres por Mexico* and *Mujeres de Negro*, says her groups advocate bringing international specialists to solve the murders. "In order to get at the truth, let people come who know how to investigate, who don't have any commitments to any party and who don't have to protect any government officials or ex-officials," says Ramos. "For this, a large budget is needed, and a lot of will and determination is required to arrive at a solution."

Kent Paterson is a freelance journalist based in Albuquerque and a frequent contributor to the Americas Program (online at www.americaspolicy.org).

WEBSITES:

EN ESPAÑOL:

Noticias sobre mujeres en América Latina
<http://www.cimacnoticias.com/>

Nuestras Hijas de Regreso de Casa
<http://www.mujeresdejuarez.org/>

Justicia para Nuestras Hijas
<http://espanol.geocities.com/justhijas/justicia/>

IN ENGLISH:

Mexico Solidarity Network
<http://www.mexicosolidarity.org/>

Amigos de las Mujeres de Juarez
(Friends of Juarez Women)
<http://www.amigosdemujeres.org/>

Washington Office on Latin America
<http://www.wola.org/>

Published by the Americas Program of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org). ©2004.

The Americas Program

"A New World of Ideas, Analysis, and Policy Options"

Founded in 1979, the IRC is a small but dynamic nonprofit policy studies center whose overarching goal is to help forge a new global affairs agenda for the U.S. government and people—one that makes the United States a more responsible global leader and partner. For more information, visit www.americaspolicy.org or email americas@irc-online.org.

Recommended citation:

Kent Paterson, "The Juarez Women's Murders: Mothers Step Up Justice Campaign as a Cover-Up Takes Hold," Americas Program (Silver City, NM: Interhemispheric Resource Center, November 24, 2004).

Web location:

<http://www.americaspolicy.org/citizen-action/focus/2004/0411juarez.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Kent Paterson

Editor: Laura Carlsen, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC