

MEXICO - Femicides in Ciudad Juárez Just a Drop in the Ocean of Blood (by Diego Cevallos, IPS)

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IPS - Ciudad Juárez in Mexico has been dubbed "the femicide capital" of the world by human rights organisations because about 400 women have been killed there in the last 13 years. But murders of women are also frequent elsewhere in Mexico, as well as in Guatemala and El Salvador, and so far there is little public discussion about them.

An average of 1,000 women a year were murdered in Mexico, a country of 103 million, between 1995 and 2005, according to official figures. Ciudad Juárez does not even appear on the list of the places where the largest number of killings occurred — instead, they are Toluca, a city close to the capital, and Guadalajara, in the central state of Jalisco.

And across the border in Guatemala, which has a population of 13 million, 566 women were killed in the first 10 months of this year, while in El Salvador, a country of 6.9 million, 286 were killed between January and August.

Despite the high numbers, these crimes have not enjoyed the same notoriety as in Ciudad Juárez, on Mexico's border with the United States, where they have been the object of an outcry by human rights groups, investigations by United Nations rapporteurs, films, documentaries and books.

"Juárez has become a by-word as a result of all the denunciations and demonstrations that the femicides there have provoked, but in other Mexican cities, and particularly in Guatemala, the situation now is extremely serious," Teresa Rodríguez, head of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) for Mexico, Central America, Cuba and the Dominican Republic, told IPS.

"We are very concerned about these murders, which for the most part go unpunished," Rodríguez said ahead of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, which since 1999 is commemorated on Nov. 25.

"There is a culture that continues to turn a blind eye to this situation, and we cannot tolerate it. It must be combated and prevented by means of public policies, but also, as has happened in Ciudad Juárez, it must be exposed and denounced, and we have to make it clear that these killings are not normal, just as violence against women and girls in general is not normal," she said.

Femicide is a term that has been coined for misogynist or gender-motivated murders of women, sometimes accompanied by sexual violence.

In Ciudad Juárez, located next to the U.S. border town of El Paso, about 400 women have been murdered since 1993. Sexual violence was involved in 78 of these crimes, according to official reports.

The Special Prosecutor's Office Investigating Crimes Related to Violence Against Women, created by the outgoing Vicente Fox administration, reported in February that there is no pattern indicative of serial killings in Juárez, contrary to what human rights organisations have claimed.

The report also said that 125 women died in their own homes, at the hands of relatives or acquaintances.

UNIFEM estimates that between 20 and 30 percent of murdered women in Mexico and Central America are killed by their partners or relatives.

In Juárez, most of the murdered women were in the 15-30 age group, and many were from low-income social strata and worked in maquiladora factories, which operate in tax-free zones and assemble products for export using imported materials.

These factories are concentrated in Ciudad Juárez and other Mexican cities along the U.S. border. Their work force mainly consists of young women, many of whom are living away from their families.

Although the Guatemalan context is different, the killings are similar. Deputy Nineth Montenegro, chair of the Guatemalan Congressional Commission on Women, said on Nov. 20 that 566 women had been murdered in her country between January and October.

Femicides in Guatemala are attributed mainly to drug trafficking, organised crime and youth gangs.

Montenegro said that in most of these deaths the motive remained unknown, and it was evident that these crimes were treated as of little importance, as they were spreading and taking root in society.

UNIFEM's regional director said that there was a lot of work to be done to curb and prevent the killing of women.

"Better training is needed for the police and in the justice system. These sectors are especially lagging in Central America, but now draft laws towards that end are being debated," she said.

The "In-depth study on all forms of violence against women", published in July by the United Nations, mentioned the Ciudad Juárez murders for the zillionth time, but also referred to the killings in Guatemala.

"Femicide occurs everywhere, but the scale of some cases of femicide within community contexts — for example, in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico and Guatemala — has drawn attention to this aspect of violence against women," the report said.

In line with the complaints by human rights groups and women's organisations, the U.N. states in its report that "impunity for these crimes is seen as a key factor in these occurrences."

The report does not mention El Salvador, but the situation there is also very serious.

Between January and August, 286 murders of women were reported in El Salvador, indicating an increase in the annual average of such deaths. From 2001 to the end of 2005, 1,320 women were killed, according to a study by the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsperson (PDDH).

Sixty percent of these killings, most of which were committed in a domestic setting, remain unpunished.

Rodríguez hopes that the exposure and denunciation of femicides in El Salvador, Guatemala and several cities in Mexico will encourage civil society and governments to create new programmes and actions to combat them, for what is happening "is totally unacceptable."