Crying out for Justice:
Murders of Women in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico
July 2003

In 1993, the bodies of young women – showing signs of rape, beatings, and mutilation – began appearing in the desert on the outskirts of Juarez, Mexico, a city of 1.4 million just across the border from El Paso. This was the beginning of an epidemic of brutal rape and murder aimed at Juarez’s young, poor women.

Over the past ten years, at least 300 women have been killed in Juarez, Chihuahua state. Of these, 93 murders are suspected to be the work of one or more serial killers who prey on young female students, store clerks, and assembly-plant workers. Their victims, some as young as ten years old, were kidnapped, raped, strangled, mutilated, and buried in shallow graves in the desert or at construction sites and railroad yards around the city. Hundreds more women have died at the hands of husbands, boyfriends, drug traffickers and other criminals. Very few have been punished for these crimes – they are murders that flourish in a city where everyone knows that you can kill a woman with impunity.

There have been no proper police investigations to identify suspects in the serial killings, nor serious efforts to prosecute them. Only one suspect has been convicted of any of the rape-murders, and only in one case. Wild theories abound – the women were murdered for their organs, for pornographic films, during satanic rituals, as part of a killing spree carried out by rich and powerful young men. Yet women’s mangled bodies continue to appear around Juarez, and the pattern of rape-killings has spread to Chihuahua City, 250 miles south.

For almost a decade, the Mexican authorities did little to address the tragedy of the Juarez murders. International pressure has shone a spotlight on the situation, prompting President Fox to announce a new federal government program to prevent murders, investigate and punish the perpetrators, and promote women’s rights and safety. Continued international pressure will be necessary to ensure that the federal and state officials take effective action to bring an end to Juarez’s nightmare of murder and impunity.

Background

Young women are easy targets in Juarez, a city plagued by drug cartels, migrant-smuggling rings, police corruption and brutality, severe underdevelopment and a ballooning population. Since the advent of the maquiladora industry – assembly plants that take advantage of cheap labor – in the 1980s, poor Mexicans have flocked to this border town in search of jobs. They live in shantytowns without basic utilities or services, and the women who work in the maquiladoras often leave for work before dawn or return home in the middle of the night, alone and unprotected.

Although violence against women in Juarez is all too common, there is only one women’s crisis center, Casa Amiga, founded in 1999 by women’s rights activist Esther Chavez Cano. A number of groups have formed to demand an end to the killings and justice for the victims’ families, including “May Our Daughters Return Home” (Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa), a group of the mothers of disappeared and murdered women in Juarez, and “Justice for our Daughters” (Justicia para Nuestras Hijas), a similar organization based in Chihuahua City.

The local authorities have been slow to react. Their original response was to blame the victims, implying that their behavior led to their rapes and murders. Former State Attorney General Arturo Chavez...
Rascón said in 1999 that some murder victims’ provocative dress had encouraged the attacks against them. Many police officers and investigators share that attitude. Recent reports still allege that the victims are involved in drug dealing and other illicit businesses.

The authorities have demonstrated a lack of both will and ability to find the culprits. Police have failed to collect clothing fragments and other evidence at the sites where women's bodies are discovered. They have mixed up DNA tests, destroyed important evidence, and have even returned some young women's remains to the wrong families. The few who have been arrested in connection with the serial murders credibly allege that police tortured them into confessing. The authorities declare that the perpetrators are in jail, and yet the killings continue.

Authorities have been indifferent, insensitive, and even hostile toward the victims’ families, who are often subject to harassment and threats. One relative of a murder victim received a threatening voicemail message warning her to drop the case; the caller ID showed that the call had come from the state judicial police.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has offered assistance to the Chihuahua state authorities, including training, DNA testing, and the use of FBI profilers. The FBI has also endorsed a binational investigation of the murders. The Chihuahua authorities have responded with requests for training and other limited forms of assistance.

Response from the State and Municipal Authorities

Homicide is a state crime and therefore falls under the jurisdiction of the Chihuahua state police and attorney general’s office. The municipal authorities are not responsible for investigating crimes; however, they are often the first to arrive at the site of a murder and can affect how well the crime scene is preserved.

The authorities have failed in many ways to effectively investigate the murders of women in Juarez and Chihuahua. First, investigators have failed to collect and preserve key evidence. Groups of volunteers in Juarez and Chihuahua organize regular searches of desert areas to find bodies and detect evidence left behind by police. In February 2002, volunteers searching the Juarez site where eight bodies had been found in November 2001 discovered clothing that was recognized by the mother of one of the victims, who participated in the search, as well as hair, shoes, and clothing remnants, none of which had been gathered by police investigators during their search of the area three months earlier. Second, authorities have mishandled and destroyed key evidence, such as clothing, DNA tests, and even the victims’ remains. Third, investigators have ignored important leads. Fourth, they have incorrectly identified victims, returning some young women's remains to the wrong families.

The shoddy investigations reveal a profound lack of concern for punishing those who abduct, rape, and murder women. They also point to more than mere incompetence, suggesting corruption and cover-up. If this is the case, the authorities are complicit through their deliberate failure to find and punish those responsible. Their reluctance to investigate also fosters a climate of impunity by sending the message that protecting the lives of women is not a priority.

Status of the Investigations

On occasion, state authorities have carried out arrests to quell public concerns over the murders. Many detainees have been tortured into providing false confessions that are later contradicted by more reliable forms of evidence. This pattern of behavior reflects a desire to scapgoat convenient suspects, such as convicted sex offenders and maquiladora shuttle-bus drivers, more than a desire to find the real culprits.

In 1995 state authorities arrested Omar Latif Sharif, an Egyptian-born engineer who worked at a maquiladora plant, and charged him with raping and murdering an 18-year-old. They also claimed he was responsible for dozens of other killings. He was convicted on one count of rape and murder, but the conviction was overturned in 1999 when his lawyer proved that the victim’s description did not match the body. The conviction was upheld in February 2003.
When more women were found dead after his arrest, police argued that he had orchestrated the killings from prison by contracting others to commit them, but the suspects they arrested were later freed for lack of evidence. In 1999, after authorities were pressured to “solve” additional murders, the state police rounded up four maquiladora shuttle-bus drivers who confessed to murdering 20 women on Sharif’s orders. They allege they were tortured into confessing. Authorities have yet to produce any evidence, other than their confessions, linking these suspects to the crimes. Their cases are pending.

On November 7, 2001, eight more women’s bodies -- showing signs of extreme brutality and sexual violence – were found in an empty lot in Juarez. Two days later, state police had arrested two bus drivers, Victor Garcia Uribe and Gustavo Gonzalez Meza, and tortured them into confessing. According to forensics expert Oscar Maynez, who resigned after refusing to falsify evidence against Garcia and Gonzalez, no evidence other than their confessions links the men to the murders. Nevertheless, a judge ordered them to stand trial, ignoring evidence of torture, including a prison doctor’s report confirming bruises and burns and suggesting the use of electric prods.

In February 2002, state police shot and killed Gonzalez’s lawyer, claiming he had been mistaken for a fugitive. A state judge ruled the police were acting in self-defense and would not be tried for the homicide. Gonzalez was found dead in his cell under mysterious circumstances on February 8, 2003. At this time, his death is not being investigated.

State officials claim that, according to their records, 74 of the murders appear to be the work of a serial killer, and 25 of those murders have been solved. Nevertheless, only one person has been convicted, for only one murder. Fourteen others, implicated in 24 murders, are in prison but have not been convicted. Most, if not all, of these suspects alleged that they were tortured into confessing. Neither the families nor the general public are convinced that the suspects in detention are the real murderers.

**Torture as an Investigative Tool**

Torture is commonly used in the context of criminal investigations in Mexico. According to the State Department’s 2002 Annual Human Rights Report for Mexico, “torture continues to occur in large part because confessions are the primary evidence in many criminal convictions. Many human rights groups link torture to the prevalence of arbitrary detention and claim that torture often follows an arbitrary arrest, sometimes without a warrant, as police or prosecutors attempt to justify the detention by securing a confession to a crime. Poorly trained and inadequately equipped to investigate crimes, police officers often attempted to solve crimes by rounding up likely suspects and then extracting confessions from them by force.”

The United Nations Committee Against Torture recently determined that torture continues to be systematically practiced in Mexico. It occurs not as a result of “exceptional situations or occasional excesses by police agents,” but is “habitual and is used systematically as a resource in criminal investigations.” Methods include beatings, electric shocks, simulated executions, suffocation, and deprivation of food and water.

A recent report by Physicians for Human Rights echoes these concerns, concluding that, “Torture and ill treatment of detainees is a major problem in Mexico facilitated by multiple medical and legal factors.” The organization surveyed forensic doctors employed by Mexico’s federal and state attorney general’s offices. Forty percent of Mexican forensic doctors had suspected torture and/or ill treatment of detainees examined in the previous year, and approximately fifty percent believe that torture is a severe problem.

**The Federal Government’s Response**

President Fox, who has called the Juarez murders a national shame, first announced in late 2001 that the federal authorities would join investigation. Chihuahua authorities resisted, claiming that the PAN president was attempting to usurp the authority of a governor from the opposition PRI party.
Because homicide is a state crime in Mexico, the federal authorities cannot investigate unless the murders are directly linked to federal crimes like weapons or drug trafficking, and only if the murders were committed specifically for the purpose of committing a federal crime. The federal authorities can also intervene if the crime appears to constitute organized crime, defined in Mexico as a group of three or more people who have organized themselves to commit one of the following crimes: terrorism, drug trafficking, human trafficking, money laundering, kidnapping for ransom, car theft, assault\(^1\), weapons trafficking, and organ trafficking.

According to that definition, organ trafficking was the only way the federal authorities could conceivably enter the investigation. As a result, in May 2003 the Federal Attorney General’s Organized Crime Unit (Unidad Especializada para Delincuencia Organizada, UEDO) took over investigations into 14 of the murders because one of the suspects claimed that he had seen the women’s bodies without organs. The suspect was held in federal custody but was recently released because there was no physical evidence to support his claim. Federal investigators confronted resistance from the state police and prosecutors, who refused to share evidence, autopsy reports, and other information.

As a result of recent international pressure, on July 22, 2003, the federal government launched its “Integrated Public Security Program” to solve and prevent the murders of women in Ciudad Juarez. The Federal Attorney General’s Office created a commission of state and federal prosecutors, police, and forensics experts to investigate and prosecute the murders. Three hundred Federal Preventative Police agents were sent to Juarez, and will coordinate the crime prevention efforts of the 1500-strong Juarez police department and the 200 Chihuahua state police stationed in Juarez. This marks the first time the federal police will share responsibility for the security of an entire Mexican city. The federal government also detailed its plans for improving public security through improved public transportation, better street lighting, and shelters for battered women.

**Recent Victims**

- **Neyra Azucena Cervantes, 19, Chihuahua City.** Neyra’s body – hacked into three pieces -- was found on July 14, 2003, two months after she had gone missing. State police arrested her cousin, David Meza, denied him access to a lawyer, and claimed that he had confessed to the murder. On July 17 he retracted his confession, saying he had been tortured. Neyra’s body was found in the same place where the remains of another woman, Paloma Escobar, had been found in March 2002. Paloma had last been seen in the car of an instructor from her computer school. Despite requests from Paloma’s family, investigators refused to ask the school for information about the instructor.

- **Marcela Viviana Rayas, 16, Chihuahua City.** Marcela’s body was found a few miles outside Chihuahua City on May 28, 2003. She had been missing since March 2003. Cynthia Kiecker, a U.S. citizen, and her husband, Ulises Perzábal, were arbitrarily arrested by state police the next day and allegedly tortured into confessing to the murder.

- **Claudia Ivet González, 20, Juarez.** Claudia disappeared on her way home from her job at the Lear Corporation plant on October 10, 2001. Her body appeared one month later, on November 6, 2001, along with seven others in a field opposite the maquiladora association headquarters.

- **Lilia Alejandra García, 17, Juarez.** Lilia disappeared on her way home from her job at a maquiladora on February 14, 2001. On February 24, 2001, her mutilated, burned, and battered corpse was found showing signs of rape. Her mother, Norma Andrade, was threatened and intimidated after posting fliers seeking information that could lead to clues about her daughter’s murder.

\(^1\) Assault is defined as harming (but not killing) a person in order to obtain money or other goods or services from the victim.