

# ***WOMEN'S ENEWS***

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## **Juárez Murder Report Leaves Critics Unsatisfied**

**Theresa Braine, WeNews Correspondent**

MEXICO CITY (WOMENSENEWS) – Four months after her appointment as a special prosecutor to head a federal investigation into a decade-long series of murders of young women in and around Ciudad Juárez, Maria Lopez Urbina has released Mexico's harshest assessment to date of state authorities.

In her first of a series of reports, Lopez found "grave deficiencies" in investigators' handling of crime scenes and evidence.

President Vicente Fox and top government officials attended the report's release earlier this month and Fox vowed bring to account the officials who may have mishandled the investigation of murders that have made Ciudad Juárez an international symbol of cavalier violence against women. He added that families, civil organizations, media, public human rights commissions, have concurred on the necessity of putting an end to the violence, Fox said.

"Moreover, they have demanded that competent authorities do their work well and end the impunity," Fox said at Lopez' presentation on June 3 at Los Pinos, the Mexican president's official residence in Mexico City. "We have accepted the challenge, considering that it's our moral duty to clarify the circumstances that have given rise to the homicides and to punish the guilty parties."

Significant, but not Sufficient

Human rights advocates' responded to the report with mixed emotions. While relieved to see the matter receiving serious and top attention from the government, they said it added no new information. They also criticized it for aiming at lower-level investigators rather than high-level officials.

"They're working professionally and taking it seriously," said Esther Chavez Cano, director and founder of Casa Amiga, a rape-crisis center in Juárez. (Chavez was a Women's eNews 21 Leader for the 21st Century in 2003.) "We're happy that they're working on it, but we are not satisfied."

For most of the past 10 years, the federal government has left jurisdiction to the state of Chihuahua, where Juárez is located, because murder is a state crime under Mexican law. Last year, however, Fox sent 1,000 federal police up north to help in the investigation, and his government took over 14 cases attributed to organ trafficking, a federal crime.

Lopez said the federal government is taking over four more cases on other grounds, bringing the total to 18.

The 81 officials guilty of negligent or incompetent police work, the report says, include 24 police officers, 17 forensic experts, 30 state investigators and three investigative supervisors. “They don’t touch the [state] attorney general or the governor,” Chavez said of the report’s authors.

Lopez plans to study 50 cases at a time and release a new report every four months. The cases were not released in any particular order; Lopez’ office simply analyzed the first 50 it was given, she said. Most involved street crime or family violence, and a few may be linked to drug trafficking, she said, adding that she was not ruling out the possibility of serial killings in future cases.

“It’s not sufficient but it is significant stuff,” said Eric Olson, Amnesty International’s advocacy director for the Americas. “This is the first real analysis done by the federal government and I think it’s an important acknowledgment of the failings of the state government.”

#### Lax Attitude Towards Violence Against Women

The report lays out facts that have become woefully familiar to those following the murders.

Since 1993, it reminds readers, more than 300 young, mostly poor women have been snatched on their way to work or school and have either never been seen again or have been discovered dumped in the desert, their bodies mutilated, raped, strangled and tortured. State authorities have lost and contaminated evidence, ridiculed and threatened victims’ families, wrongly imprisoned people and failed to identify dozens of bodies.

“All those things were key findings in our report last August,” said Olson, referring to a report by the human rights group that blasted Mexico for failing to solve and prevent the murders. “It’s too bad that it has taken them this long to recognize that officially but we’re glad that they have.”

Olson also criticized the report for not including victims in Chihuahua City, 200 miles south of Juárez. “We’ve always been concerned that the mandate for both the commissioner and the prosecutor has been limited to Ciudad Juárez and doesn’t include the cases in Chihuahua. We think that needs to happen because there’s clearly quite a number of cases in Chihuahua now as well.”

Meanwhile, with Mexico taking an ever-higher stance on the world stage regarding human rights – as in an April vote before the U.N. Commission on Human Rights that denounced Cuba’s rights record – it draws attention to its handling of affairs at home.

The implications of the murder investigation go beyond Juárez and have the potential to affect what advocates such as Chavez say is a lax attitude towards violence against women throughout Mexico and much of Latin America.

“They’re participating in a culture of discrimination and they don’t take these problems seriously,” Chavez said of authorities in general. “Neither the president nor the state governors appear to be making women’s safety a priority.”

#### Call for Outside Investigation

Laura Salinas, a law professor specializing in human rights at the Autonomous Metropolitan University in Mexico City, said that whether the Juárez murders are ever solved, the cases highlights the dangers facing women.

“What happens in Juárez happens all over,” Salinas said, adding that in many of Mexico’s states the laws do not protect women. For example, a man can be pardoned for rape if he marries his victim, she said.

Meanwhile, an entire other problem has grown out of the mismanaged investigations, and that is the wrongful imprisonment of several people, including a U.S. citizen, for some of the murders. Most of these suspects allege they were tortured into confessing, yet nothing has been done to secure their release. This, Olson said, must be addressed immediately.

“We think these cases need to be urgently reviewed by outside authorities,” he said. “There seems to be a probability that many are wrongfully in jail and wrongfully suffering the consequences of this.”

Theresa Braine is a freelance journalist based in Mexico City.

For more information:

Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) – Report on October 2003 congressional delegation to Ciudad Juárez:

<http://www.wola.org/Mexico/Juarez/Juarez/Ciudad%20Juarez%20delegation%20REPORT%20web.htm>

*Women’s eNews* – “Juárez March Heightens Pressure to Solve Murders”:

<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/1723/>

*Women’s eNews* – “U.S. Reps in Mexico Pressing Murder Investigation”:

<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/1572/>

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