

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AMR 20/004/2004 (Public)
News Service No: 245
4 October 2004

Embargo Date: 4 October 2004 14:00 GMT

Canada: Indifference to the safety of Indigenous women must end

Canadian officials have too long ignored the threat to Indigenous women in Canadian towns and cities. Many are missing, some have been murdered and Canadian authorities are not doing enough to stop the violence, says Amnesty International in a report, *Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence Against Indigenous Women in Canada*, released today.

"All women have the right to live in safety and dignity but overt cultural prejudice and official indifference have put the Indigenous women of Canada in harm's way," says Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International. "As a priority, the Governments at all levels in Canada must work with Indigenous women in the country to ensure that no more 'sisters' are 'stolen' from their communities as the result of discrimination and violence."

The report is being released as part of a global campaign to stop violence against women. The report tells the stories of Indigenous women and girls who have gone missing or been killed in Vancouver, Prince Albert, Saskatoon, Regina and Winnipeg, and draws on wider public information in concluding that this is a serious human rights concern.

Lack of consistent reporting and comprehensive analysis by Canadian police and government agencies of violent crimes against Indigenous women leaves many unanswered questions about the scale and sources of violence. It is Amnesty International's view, however, that the social and economic marginalization of Indigenous women has placed far too many women in harm's way.

The reality of this threat is borne out by the suffering inflicted on so many Indigenous families, sometimes more than once. In one family, over three decades, there have been two murders. On 12 November, 1971, Helen Betty Osborne, a 19-year-old Cree student from Manitoba, was abducted by four white men in The Pas and then sexually assaulted and brutally killed. A provincial inquiry found that police had long been aware of white men sexually preying on Indigenous women and girls in The Pas but "did not feel that the practice necessitated any particular vigilance."

Three decades later, on 25 March, 2003, Felicia Solomon, a 16-year-old cousin of Helen Betty Osborne, failed to return home from school in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Two months later in June 2003, body parts identified as those of Felicia Solomon were discovered. Her killer has not been found.

"When will the Canadian government finally recognize the real dangers faced by Indigenous

women?" says Darlene Osborne, a spokesperson for the family. "Families like mine all over Canada are wondering how many more sisters and daughters we have to lose before real government action is taken."

The report makes the following links between discrimination and violence against Indigenous women in Canadian cities:

Despite assurances to the contrary, police in Canada have often failed to provide Indigenous women with an adequate standard of protection.

The social and economic marginalization of Indigenous women, along with a history of government policies that have torn apart Indigenous families and communities, has pushed a disproportionate number of Indigenous women into dangerous situations that include extreme poverty, homelessness and prostitution.

The resulting vulnerability of Indigenous women has been exploited by Indigenous and non-Indigenous men to carry out acts of extreme brutality against them.

These acts of violence may be motivated by racism, or may be carried out in the expectation that indifference to the welfare and safety of Indigenous women will allow the perpetrators to escape justice.

The report also notes the failure of federal and provincial governments to implement many of the recommendations made by past commissions and inquiries into the welfare and safety of Indigenous people in Canada. Timely implementation of these recommendations would have helped reduce the marginalization of Indigenous women in Canada and thus increased their safety.

The report recommends urgent measures that governments must implement to improve protection for Indigenous women. Police forces must work with Indigenous communities to develop protocols to ensure appropriate and effective police response to reports of missing Indigenous women and children. All governments must ensure adequate, long-term funding of the frontline services needed by women to escape violence. Comprehensive national research on the magnitude of the problem is immediately needed.

Action must be taken to recruit more Indigenous police and to train others to understand the complexity of Indigenous issues. And there needs to be a commitment by all agencies and levels of government to ensuring the full participation of Indigenous women in the design and implementation of the policies that directly affect their welfare.

"Violence against women is a global human rights crisis, to which all governments must give priority attention. Here in Canada, the double-jeopardy discrimination of gender and Indigenous identity has contributed to the disappearance and murder of so many Indigenous women -- this must now end," says Irene Khan.

For a full copy of the report: "Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence Against Indigenous Women in Canada", please see:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAMR200032004>

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