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The Inter American Court of Human Rights hears important case of violence against women in Mexico

On 28 and 29 April the Inter American Court of Human Rights will hold a final public hearing in Santiago de Chile in the case against the Mexican State brought by the families of three young women who were brutally murdered in Ciudad Juárez in 2001.

Amnesty International believes that the hearing will provide an important opportunity for representatives of the victims to demonstrate the failure of the Mexican authorities to effectively prevent and punish a well documented pattern of violence against women in Ciudad Juárez which has left more than 450 women murdered since 1993, many of whom were abducted and raped.

The bodies of two girls and a young woman, Esmeralda Herrera Monreal, Laura Berenice Ramos Monárrez and Claudia Ivette González, were discovered in a former cotton field (Campo Algodonero) in Ciudad Juárez on 6 and 7 November 2001 along with the bodies of five other young women. At least five of the victims were under 18 years old. They had been reported missing earlier in 2000 and 2001 by their families. One of the bodies has never been correctly identified.

A pattern of abduction, rape and murder of women in Ciudad Juárez had begun in 1993. The authorities consistently failed to take seriously the crimes, often saying that the victims were to blame for the crimes committed against them and treating the relatives with contempt. Few of the perpetrators of these crimes were brought to account, creating a climate of fear and insecurity for women.

The case of the Campo Algodonero became notorious as it exemplified the manner in which municipal, state and federal authorities discriminated against women victims of killings and their families, misidentified bodies, failed to gather reliable forensic evidence or conduct effective investigations. Instead, they resorted to numerous irregularities including torture to extract confessions and build fabricated cases – one of those initially convicted later won his appeal and was released.

After national and international outcry at the pattern of killings of women and impunity known as “femicide”, the federal and state government took some steps to improve prevention and investigation procedures, but in many cases those responsible for the killings, including in the case of the three Campo Algodonero victims before the Inter American Court, have not been brought to justice.

Despite identifying at least 177 state officials possibly implicated in deficient investigations of murdered women in the city, the authorities have never brought any implicated official to account for his or her failures. Full reparations for the crimes have not been made to many of the relatives of the victims, including a lack of adequate acknowledgement of the State’s failure to effectively respect, protect and fulfil their rights and the rights of their murdered relatives under international human rights law.

The Mexican authorities have argued that in recent years measures have been taken to tackle the pattern of violence against women in Mexico and effectively investigate murders of women. The measures introduced have addressed some of the most glaring aspects of discrimination

against women victims of violence and their families, such as the contempt with which many were originally treated, and leading to some improved investigations. However, the impact of many measures remains unclear: the pattern of violence against women in the state of Chihuahua continues, official data is still inadequate and the measures to identify and prosecute all perpetrators insufficient.

Those responsible for continuing threats and harassment against human rights defenders and women's organizations that have campaigned for truth and justice have also never been identified or brought to justice. In the last two years, high levels of drugs related killings in Ciudad Juárez have disguised the fact that murders of women remain all too common, highlighting the failure of the State to adequately address the underlying causes of violence against women or effectively uphold international human rights law requiring the immediate end to discrimination and violence against women.

Background Information

The Court will rule in the following weeks on whether Mexico is responsible for failing to ensure a number of rights enshrined in the American Convention on Human Rights and Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against women known as "Convention of Belem do Pará".

In 2003 Amnesty International published the report "Mexico: Intolerable Killings: 10 years of abductions and murder of women in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua", AMR 41/026/2003. The organization has continued to campaign for truth and justice for the families and an end to violence against women in Chihuahua State.

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