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Mexico: Ten years of intolerable crimes against women in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua must end now

(Mexico City) The failure to address ten years of killings and abductions of women in the state of Chihuahua casts doubt on the capacity of the Mexican government to turn its rhetoric on human rights into reality, said Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

During her first visit to Mexico -- where she will meet President Vicente Fox, other ministers from his administration, political party leaders and representatives from civil society -- Irene Khan will lobby for more effective intervention by the federal authorities to investigate this brutal pattern of violence against women in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua and to bring to justice those responsible.

"The pervasive failure of the authorities to address these cases is tantamount to tolerance of them," stated Ms Khan as she launched a report: *Mexico: Intolerable killings, Ten years of abductions and murders in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua* after a visit to Ciudad Juárez where she met mothers of missing and murdered women.

According to official figures 70 women remain missing in Ciudad Juárez, and more recently in the city of Chihuahua. Information from other sources puts this figure at 400 women missing since 1993. Their families fear the worst, given the alarming number of missing women who have subsequently been found murdered days, or even years, later.

Amnesty International's investigation found that in the last ten years approximately 370 women have been murdered, of which at least 137 were sexually assaulted prior to their death. A further 75 bodies have still not been identified -- it is thought some may be those of women who have been reported missing but grossly inadequate forensic investigations have made this impossible to confirm.

Many of the women were abducted, held captive for several days and subjected to humiliation, torture and the most horrific sexual violence before dying, most as a result of asphyxiation caused by strangulation or from being beaten. Their bodies have then been found hidden among rubble or abandoned in desert areas near the city.

A significant number of the missing or murdered women were employed in assembly plants known as *maquiladoras*. Waitresses, students or women working in the informal economy have also been targeted by the assailants. In short, young women with no power in society, some with children to support

and from poor backgrounds, whose deaths have no political cost for the local authorities.

"For many of the women who migrate to find work in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua, the pervasive pattern of violence against women has turned their dream of finding new opportunities into a nightmare," Ms Khan stated.

"It is shameful that in the first few years after the abductions and murders began, the authorities displayed open discrimination towards the women and their families in their public statements. On more than one occasion the women themselves were blamed for their own abduction or murder because of the way they dressed or because they worked in bars at night."

Amnesty International's report states: "The failure of the competent authorities to take action to investigate these crimes, whether through indifference, lack of will, negligence or inability, has been blatant over the last ten years." The organization has documented unjustifiable delays in the initial efforts to locate the missing women, a failure to follow up crucial evidence and witness statements, and the fabrication of evidence and use of torture against detained suspects. In other cases, the forensic examinations carried out have been inadequate, with contradictory and incorrect information being given to families about the identity of bodies, thereby causing further distress to them and disrupting their grieving process.

"The suffering of the families of these women has been intensified again and again -- not only have the authorities ignored their demands that a formal criminal investigation be opened from the first day on which a woman is reported missing, the families' demands for justice have fallen on deaf ears," Ms Khan stated.

"The real protagonists of this tragedy are the families of these women who have single-handedly fought for justice in the face of hostility," continued Ms Khan referring to the threats and intimidation that relatives, lawyers and members of NGOs have been subjected to. Highlighting how the state authorities have consistently sought to delegitimise the families and their struggle, she also called on the authorities to respect their dignity and their right to be involved actively in the investigative process.

The state authorities claim that most of the murders have been "solved". Although, according to their figures, 79 people have been convicted, in the vast majority of cases justice has not been done. Furthermore, the quality of the investigations and allegations of torture of suspects held in connection with the killings, cast doubt on the integrity of the criminal proceedings brought against many of those arrested in connection with these crimes. Meanwhile, year after year the crimes continue.

"The cases of Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua are symptomatic of the failings of the administration of justice nationwide," said Ms Khan.

There is an urgent need for a profound structural reform of the justice system so that its investigative procedures and capabilities will provide full access to justice for the victims and a fair trial for the accused. The human rights "Diagnostic" being carried out in the context of the Technical Cooperation Agreement provides a golden opportunity to address these underlying structural problems. The Agreement signed between the government and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights draws on the insights of national civil society and the recommendations of international human rights bodies.

"The Diagnostic process and the Human Rights Program which will flow from it demand unequivocal public support from the federal authorities at the highest level," stated Ms Khan. "The ability to address cases such as the killings in Juárez will be a benchmark of the effectiveness of this process of reform."

Ms Khan welcomed promising developments such as the recent creation of an inter-institutional

sub-commission, under the auspices of the *Secretaría de Gobernación* (Ministry of the Interior) to look specifically into the Juárez cases, but she cautioned: "These positive steps have to be seen in the light of ten years of empty promises and the continuing failure to involve relatives of the victims in these initiatives. Ten years of intolerable crimes must end now."

"President Fox and his government have committed themselves to promoting the protection of human rights at all levels -- inside and outside the country. The cases of these murdered and missing women in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua contain many of the elements that undermine the credibility of these commitments."

"The full implementation of the measures recommended by Amnesty International and other organizations will be the clearest sign that these killings and abductions are not tolerated by the authorities," concluded Ms Khan.

Background

The first cases of abduction and killing of women and girls exhibiting a similar pattern were reported in Ciudad Juárez ten years ago. Located in the desert on the border with the United States, it is now the most heavily-populated city in Chihuahua state. Its geographical position has turned it into fertile territory for drug trafficking and other organized crime, which has led to high levels of violence and public insecurity. The establishment of the *maquiladoras*, whose profitability is largely derived from the hiring of very cheap local labour, has attracted large numbers of migrant workers from other parts of Mexico. Many of them are women living and working in precarious circumstances which leave them at even greater risk of gender-based violence.

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