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Ten members of Venezuelan family killed as authorities fail to investigate

With 10 killings in their family in a little over a decade, the Barrios' story is hard to believe.

It all started in the early hours of 28 August 1998.

Benito Antonio Barrios, a 28-year-old man, was at his home in Guanayén, state of Aragua, in southern Venezuela, with his two sons, Jorge Antonio and Carlos Alberto, when a group of police entered the home, beat him and took him away.

Eyewitnesses, including his brother Luis Alberto, watched on as four officers handcuffed and detained him.

The next time anyone saw Benito Antonio was when his dead body was found at a local hospital, with gunshot wounds to his chest and stomach.

Police later said they had gone to Benito Antonio's home in response to a call reporting a gun fight between two men. But it is unclear what happened exactly before and during his detention.

To date no one has been brought to justice for this killing and the Venezuelan authorities have been unable to provide an explanation as to what happened.

Unfortunately, this was only the beginning of what turned out to be 15 years of violence and intimidation for the Barrios family.

A decade of killings

Five years later, on 11 December 2003, police detained Benito's son, Jorge Antonio, who was then a teenager. His uncle Narciso and cousin Nestor followed the police to find out what happened to him.

In response, the police released the boy but shot his uncle Narciso several times in the head, killing him in front of Nestor.

The following year, on 20 September 2004, Benito's brother Luis Alberto received threats from a policeman. Later that day, when he left the house after hearing noises on the roof, he was shot in the head several times and killed.

Not a year had passed before 16-year-old Rigoberto Barrios was also shot in January 2005. He died four days later, after saying that he had been shot by a policeman. Rigoberto's mother also said a policeman had threatened to kill her sons.

In 2005, the situation for the Barrios family got so desperate and security measures put in place so inadequate that several members of the family fled Guanayén for their safety.

But the nightmare didn't end there.

In the following years, a second generation of Barrios young men, including Oscar José Barrios, 22, Wilmer José Flores Barrios, 19, Juan José Barrios, 28, Victor Tomás Barrios, 16 and Jorge Antonio Barrios, 24 – Benito Antonio's eldest son – were also shot dead.

Members of the family have been threatened and intimidated as they seek justice and pursue complaints against the authorities for the failure of the police to investigate the killings.

Impunity and no protection

On several occasions since 2004, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights issued urgent measures ordering the Venezuelan authorities to provide protection for members of the Barrios family.

However, no effective protective measures have ever been taken.

In November 2011, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled that the Venezuelan state was responsible for failing to investigate these crimes effectively and prosecute and bring justice those responsible, as well as failing to provide protection to the family.

But to date, the sentence has not been implemented and the murderers have continued to elude justice, while the Barrios family fear there is no end in sight to the campaign of threats and attacks.

[COFAVIC](#) – a Caracas-based organization who has been working on these cases – recently said: “Authorities haven't issued even a press release or a public call condemning the deaths. This lack of interest reveals that in Venezuela there are double standards for victims, some receive attention from the state and some do not”

The tenth killing

On 16 May this year, 17-year-old Roni Barrios was found dead with wounds to his head and neck that point to a possible assault with a machete or axe. Roni worked and lived in Caracas, but had gone back to his hometown in Guanayén to visit relatives. He was seen alive the night before.

His death is the tenth in the Barrios family – three of which have been in the last 12 months.

“When I started taking action to seek justice for Narciso’s death, the second of my brothers to be killed, I never thought that so many others were going to be killed right before my eyes. I thought that by seeking justice I was protecting the others, but after a while I started to think that maybe it made it worse,” said Eloisa, Narciso’s sister and Roni’s aunt, told a local human rights organization.

“How many more members of the Barrios family have to die before the Venezuelan authorities take action to address the issue head on? Urgent action needs to be taken immediately to investigate these murders and protect the family,” said Guadalupe Marengo, Americas Director at Amnesty International.

Deadly trend

Venezuela has one of the highest levels of violent crime in the region, with a high incidence of killings and armed violence. According to the Venezuelan Ministry of Interior there were more than 16,000 killings in the country in 2012 alone. Fully 92 per cent of them were committed with [firearms](#).

There also are concerns about the use of firearms by the police. According to a report from the National Police General Council, 80 per cent of police institutions were using weapons in a way that violated institutional guidelines.

In the past few years Venezuela has introduced two new laws to regulate the police, and in March 2010, the Office of the Attorney General established a Criminal Investigation Unit to improve prosecution rates of human rights violations committed by the security forces.