

Americas: Day of the "disappeared"-- Where are they?

"Disappearance" still remains an open wound in many parts of the American continent, Amnesty International said today, as thousands of people come together across the region to reiterate once again their demand for truth and justice in the cases of their "disappeared" loved ones.

"Day in, day out, the relatives of the thousands of people who have 'disappeared' in the past three decades endure the agonizing suffering of not knowing what happened to their children, parents, spouses, sisters and brothers," the organization added, stressing how this violates their right not to be subjected to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

It is estimated that between 1966 and 1986 some 90,000 people "disappeared" in countries including Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Haiti. This figure includes young children and babies born during their mothers' detention in countries such as Argentina, El Salvador, Guatemala and Uruguay, some of whom are believed to have been subsequently given up for adoption.

"Although 'disappearances' are associated, in the public perception, with the authoritarian military governments of previous decades, sadly they are not exclusive to them, and continue to occur to this day," Amnesty International said, adding that it continues to receive reports of possible "disappearances" from countries such as Guatemala and Ecuador.

The problem is particularly acute in Colombia where, in the year 1999 alone, some 300 people "disappeared" in the context of the

conflict between the armed opposition groups, the Colombian army and their allied paramilitary groups.

In Guatemala, one of the most recent cases of "disappearance" is that of university lecturer and women's rights activist Mayra Angelina Gutiérrez, who has been missing since April 2000. The fact that she was listed on a secret military intelligence database, and that she was collecting data on the highly sensitive issue of Guatemala's illegal adoption racket in which military and their families are believed to be involved, suggest that her "disappearance" may have been politically motivated.

"In the majority of cases throughout the region, governments have shown a clear lack of political will to support efforts to shed light on the fate of the "disappeared" and to bring those responsible to justice," Amnesty International added, noting how in many countries judicial actions have been started, but have been subsequently stalled through lack of cooperation from the authorities.

In Chile and Argentina, where enforced disappearances were widespread and systematic in the years of military rule, amnesty laws have hindered for over two decades the quest for truth and justice in thousands of cases of "disappearance". A similar law exists in Uruguay, where some 34 people disappeared, while more Uruguayan citizens were made to "disappear" in Argentina in the context of Operation Condor.

"Such laws should be annulled as they have so far prevented the truth from emerging, and granted impunity to those responsible, in clear violation of the state's obligation to bring to justice perpetrators of human rights violations," Amnesty International said.

"However, the stumbling blocks the relatives of the 'disappeared' encounter in their tireless struggle are not just of a legal nature," the

organization continued. "Individuals and organizations fighting to break the wall of silence, complicity and impunity that surrounds the fate of the 'disappeared' are often the victims of intimidation, harassment and threats."

"The perpetrators of this heinous crime enjoy widespread protection, but this is not the case with victims' relatives and human rights defenders supporting them," the organization added.

In Guatemala, attacks and threats have marred the attempts to exhume mass clandestine graves thought to contain the remains of the some 200,000 people -- mostly unarmed indigenous civilians -- who were killed by the armed forces and their paramilitary aides in the civil conflict and are counted amongst the Guatemalan "disappeared".

In Colombia, members of the human rights group ASFADDES (*Asociación de Familiares de Detenidos-Desaparecidos*) are repeatedly threatened and harassed for their work to bring to justice those responsible for "disappearances" during the country's ongoing civil conflict. The work of these human rights defenders has even lead to some 'disappearing' themselves. Nearly a year ago Angel Quintero Mesa and Claudia Monsalve Pulgarín -- both working to discover the fate of their "disappeared" relatives -- "disappeared" in Medellín. To this day and despite ongoing international and national pressure the Colombian authorities have not yet taken all the necessary steps to investigate their whereabouts, to bring those responsible to justice, nor to guarantee the safety of other ASFADDES members.

"Where are the 'disappeared'?, is a legitimate question that governments across the Americas must not continue to ignore," Amnesty International said, urging the competent authorities to take immediate steps to investigate thoroughly all cases of 'disappearance', whenever they

occurred, with a view to identifying and bringing to trial those responsible, and to allowing families to know the truth and come to terms with their loss.

Background

30 August is commonly commemorated as International Day of the Disappeared. This custom was started by the Latin American non-governmental organization FEDEFAM (*Federación Latinoamericana de Asociaciones de Familiares de Detenidos-Desaparecidos*) and is now marked all around the world.

"Disappearance" is a global scourge, with instances occurring in at least 30 countries throughout the world. The UN's Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances has 45,998 outstanding cases of "disappearance" on its registers.

A "disappearance" occurs whenever there are reasonable grounds to believe that a person has been deprived of freedom by the authorities or their agents, with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the state, and the authorities deny that the victim is held in their custody, thus concealing the victim's whereabouts and fate, thereby placing the person outside the protection of the law.

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