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Mexico: Federal authorities must lead Atenco investigations

Amnesty International today urged Mexico's Federal authorities to take over investigations into at least 23 reports of sexual abuse committed by security forces in San Salvador Atenco during police operations 5 months ago and to ensure justice for the victims.

The call comes as the organization revealed, in a new report published today, further evidence of the Mexico State authority's failure to seriously investigate the women's allegations of sexual abuse by police officers while in their custody and even to cover up evidence of such abuse.

"The state authorities have placed the burden of proof on the victims, while seeking to discredit their allegations. The conflict of interest and lack of impartiality evident in the state level investigations is a recipe for impunity," said Kerrie Howard, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Americas Programme.

"Given the seriousness of the crimes and the constant failures of the State authorities to effectively investigate the allegations of abuse, it is high time for the Federal Prosecutor on Crimes against Women to take over. These crimes are acts of torture under international law and the authorities must ensure that those responsible are held to account," said Kerrie Howard.

A number of the victims told Amnesty International delegates that the Mexico state authorities refused to allow them to file criminal complaints and didn't provide them with appropriate medical or psychological attention – essential in securing critical evidence in cases of sexual abuse.

Maria Garcia (not her real name) told Amnesty International that when she informed the official from the State prosecutor's office that she intended to file a complaint of rape, another official, who was supervising the taking of statements, said the issue of rape could not be recorded and ripped the paper from his typewriter.

Margarita Reyes (not her real name), another of the women sexually abused while taken into custody, said: "When I arrived at the prison, the forensic doctor did not want to certify that I had been raped. It seems unfair to me that I shouldn't be believed, that someone can believe that I made it up."

"This case is perhaps the last opportunity for the Fox administration to demonstrate its commitment to end impunity for violence against women and fulfil its domestic human rights obligations," said Kerrie Howard.

Background Information

The women were amongst 211 people arrested during a two day police operation in the towns of Texcoco and San Salvador Atenco, Mexico State. The operation aimed to stop protests by a local peasant farmer organization "Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra".

To date, seven women and 21 men remain in custody accused of kidnapping police during the demonstration.

Amnesty International is urging authorities to ensure that judicial proceedings against those in detention or on bail meet fair trial standards. the organization is also calling for a full and impartial investigation into the serious human rights violations committed during the police operation in Atenco.

Amnesty International members across the region -- including in Mexico, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Peru, Canada, and in Spain -- will also urge representatives of the Mexican government in their countries to take action to ensure prompt and effective investigations.

**For a copy of "Mexico: Violence against women – justice denied in Mexico State", please see:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAMR410282006>**

Public Document

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