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Torture in Mexico: 'I still think it was a nightmare'

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/torture-mexico-i-still-think-it-was-nightmare-2013-06-24>

It took Miriam Isaura López Vargas several weeks to piece together what happened to her after she was tortured and raped by Mexican soldiers.

On 2 February 2011, the 30-year-old mother of four had just dropped three of her children at school in the city of Ensenada, in northern Mexico, when two men wearing balaclavas forced her into a white van and took her away.

Until then, Miriam didn't know the men were soldiers or that she was being taken to a military barracks. She was blindfolded and her hands were tied.

"I didn't know who they were or anything, and when I asked them they put a gun to my head and told me to shut up or they would blow my head off," she told Amnesty International.

Miriam was then taken to a military barracks in the city of Tijuana, around 84 kilometres away, where she was kept for a week.

And, she says, they were the worst seven days of her life.

"In that place they tortured me: they repeatedly put wet cloth over my face and poured water over it so I couldn't breathe. They gave me electric shocks," she explained.

Miriam later described how she was repeatedly raped by soldiers while she was there.

The soldiers were trying to force her to "confess" to trafficking drugs through a military checkpoint. She denies any involvement and asserts that she was travelling to visit her mother who lives 45 kilometres away, a journey she took several times a week.

Days of uncertainty

After seven days of torture, Miriam was taken to a pre-charge detention centre in Mexico City. While the abuse stopped, she describes how she would jump at every noise, terrified that her tormentors had returned.

"The first days were very difficult because I didn't know if they were going to continue beating me, if they were going to continue abusing me. I would hear a little noise and feel under attack," she said.

Miriam spent 80 days in the pre-trial centre and was then charged with drug-related offences and transferred to a prison in Ensenada.

Only then was she able to talk to her husband and tell him about the abuse she had endured. Her husband, in turn, passed on the information to a human rights lawyer who took up her case.

"At the beginning my mind was blank, I couldn't remember a lot of things. As time passed, I started to relax a little, remembering, trying to reconstruct everything they had done to me,

and I would start telling him.”

She was finally released on 2 September 2011, after her case was thrown out of court for a lack of evidence.

A nightmare

Following representations by her lawyer, Mexico’s National Human Rights Commission investigated the case and concluded she had been tortured. But the official investigation is moving at a snail’s pace, and those responsible for the abuse she suffered have not faced justice.

Amnesty International says cases like Miriam’s are frequent in Mexico, where authorities routinely use torture against people who are simply caught on “the wrong side of the military operations against criminal gangs”.

The Mexican National Human Rights Commission recently reported that during 2012 alone, it had received 1,921 complaints of human rights violations committed by the armed forces and 802 against federal police.

“Security forces across Mexico continue to target people perceived as the enemy, particularly those believed to have links to drug trafficking – without necessarily possessing any real evidence. This has resulted in arbitrary detentions, torture, enforced disappearances and unlawful killings,” said Rupert Knox, Mexico researcher at Amnesty International.

Today, Miriam still struggles to come to terms with her story.

“I still think it was a bad dream, a nightmare. I try to live normally but I’m always scared, for me, for my family, that something is going to happen to them. I’m always on the defensive, waiting for the time when they will come to do something to me because I never expected to experience what happened to me,” said Miriam.

More Information

Watch a video of Miriam’s story http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btCPkdlQ_TQ

Known abuses, but victims ignored: Torture in Mexico (Report, October 2012)
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AMR41/063/2012/en/74354a01-4946-4301-b922-8d048782bfef/amr410632012en.pdf>

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<http://www.amnesty.org/en/appeals-for-action/Torture-in-Mexico>