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Enforced disappearances still an appalling reality in the Americas

Enforced disappearances in the Americas are not only an inheritance of the dark past of the authoritarian governments of the 1970s and 80s, but also an appalling ongoing practice, Amnesty International said as it marked the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances.

“In Colombia and in Mexico, the authorities aren’t facing up to a serious ongoing problem of enforced disappearances,” said Guadalupe Marengo, Amnesty International’s Americas Programme Director.

“Both countries’ governments are failing to effectively investigate these cases and bring those suspected of criminal responsibility to justice. This impunity only fuels new enforced disappearances, as the perpetrators believe there are no consequences for their actions.

Meanwhile in other countries in the region – including Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Bolivia, Peru, El Salvador, Guatemala and Haiti – thousands of people are still missing decades after internal conflicts and political repression.

“For truth and justice to prevail, it’s absolutely essential that the victims’ relatives find out the whereabouts of their disappeared loved ones,” said Marengo.

“Each person matters. Within the horrific figures of thousands of disappeared, lies the pain and trauma of the relatives searching for their loved ones.”

Mexico

In Mexico, more than 26,000 people were reported missing or disappeared between 2006 and 2012 – many at the hands security forces or criminal gangs. The almost complete failure to investigate most cases has prevented the true number of enforced disappearances, in which public officials are implicated, from coming to light. However, the National Human Rights Commission is just examining 2,400 ongoing cases of enforced disappearances.

[In a report launched last June](#), Amnesty International documented more than 85 emblematic cases of enforced disappearances out of 152 cases of people reported disappeared or abducted.

“Impunity remains almost total and, in spite of repeated promises from the authorities, the search for the victims is still ineffective. The Mexican government does not seem to be really committed to end enforced disappearances,” said Rupert Knox, researcher on Mexico for Amnesty International.

“The authorities are keen to blame criminal gangs for all disappearances, ignoring their direct responsibility to prevent and punish the cases in which public officials are implicated and their obligation to investigate all cases before ordinary civilian courts. The relatives of the disappeared are frequently denied any information and families are often forced to carry out their own investigations at great personal risk. It is the brave and constant demands of relatives for truth and justice, that keeps the flame

of hope alive,” said Knox.

In the northern city of Nuevo Laredo alone, four people disappeared in the space of six days from 29 July-3 August this year after marines stopped and detained them at different checkpoints around the city. Despite eyewitness testimony confirming the detentions, the naval authorities continue to deny responsibility for the disappearances and the government has done nothing to locate the victims.

Colombia

Colombia’s long-running internal armed conflict has left at least 25,000 victims of enforced disappearances in its wake since 1985. According to official figures, there were more than 190 suspected cases in 2012.

“Enforced disappearances carried out by paramilitaries and the security forces, either acting alone or in collusion with each other, have been a hallmark of the country’s 50-year-old armed conflict, and many cases continue to be reported,” said Marcelo Pollack, Amnesty International researcher on Colombia.

“Very few of the perpetrators have ever been brought to justice. [Recent legislative measures](#) to broaden the scope of military jurisdiction are likely to make it even harder to bring to justice those suspected of criminal responsibility for human rights abuses, including enforced disappearances.”

Both Mexico and Colombia have ratified the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances but have failed so far to recognize the competence of the Committee on Enforced Disappearances to receive and consider individual complaints, placing in doubt their commitment to uphold their treaty obligations in practice.

In other countries across the region, enforced disappearances are no longer as prevalent as in the past, but they do still happen.

Brazil

In Brazil, the whereabouts of Amarildo, a bricklayer from Rocinha, Rio de Janeiro’s biggest favela, are still unknown after he was detained by police officer on July 14 after he was reportedly mistaken for a wanted drug dealer. Several human rights organizations, [including Amnesty International](#) have denounced his disappearance.

Police say he was released after a criminal records check, but none of his relatives or friends have seen him since, and surveillance cameras installed near the entrance to the police station recorded Amarildo’s entry, but not his exit.

Dominican Republic

[The case of Juan Almonte](#) in the Dominican Republic is as emblematic as Amarildo’s, but older and more complex. An accountant and a member of the Dominican Committee of Human Rights, Almonte was last seen on 28 September 2009, when witnesses say he was detained by police officers while walking to his office in Santo Domingo.

The police have always denied arresting him and the authorities have not complied with repeated calls from the Inter-American Commission and Inter-American Court of Human Rights to investigate his case. Following his disappearance, his relatives and lawyers reported being monitored by police, both in cars and in the street in front of their houses. Juan’s sister also received anonymous telephone calls asking her to stop publicizing her brother’s disappearance.