

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## **Guatemala: Women in danger - killings of women and girls**

15-year old Maria Isabel was kidnapped in Guatemala City on the night of 15 December 2001. Her body was found shortly before Christmas. According to Maria Isabel's relatives, her body showed evidence of rape, her hands and feet had been tied with barbed wire, she had been stabbed and strangled and put in a bag. Her face was disfigured from being punched, her body was punctured with small holes, there was a rope around her neck and her nails were bent back.

Despite some initial investigations, those responsible for Maria Isabel's murder are still at liberty.

"The lack of proper investigations and convictions in cases of killings of women and girls in Guatemala sends the message that violence against women in the country is acceptable. The Guatemalan authorities must change this perception by ensuring that murders like Maria Isabel's are investigated and justice delivered, if the commitments it has made to prevent violence against women are to have any real value," said Amnesty International today as it launched a new report on the killings of women and girls in Guatemala.

According to the Guatemalan authorities, 1,188 women and girls were murdered between 2001 and 2004. Many of the victims have been killed in exceptionally brutal circumstances. There is evidence to suggest that sexual violence, particularly rape, is a strong component characterizing many of the killings but this is often not reflected in official records. In a number of cases, the bodies were mutilated and disfigured in ways associated with killings during the internal armed conflict.

To date, according to the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office, only 9% of the cases has been investigated.

"The true dimension of the killings of women in Guatemala remains unknown, which underlines the lack of attention given by the Guatemalan authorities to the issue. Rape and other sexually violent crimes are often almost invisible due to the lack of reliable statistical information about the numbers and circumstances in which women are killed," said Amnesty International.

Most of the women were housewives, students and professionals. Many came from poor sectors of society, working in low paid jobs as domestic employees, shop or factory workers. Some were migrant workers from neighbouring countries in Central America, others were members or former members of youth gangs and sex workers. Most of them were between 13 and 40 years of age.

The majority of the murders have occurred in urban areas which have also witnessed a dramatic rise in violent crime in recent years often linked to organized crime, or to the activities of street youth gangs known as "maras".

Amnesty International's report highlights how discrimination is at the core of the human rights crisis women are facing in the country, even characterizing the authorities' response to it.

References to the victims by some officials as gang members or prostitutes have reflected a great level of discrimination towards the victims and their families. Such attitudes often influence the way in which the cases are investigated and documented or indeed whether they are ever investigated or documented.

"Official inaction and complacency has intensified the suffering of the families whose pleas for a proper criminal investigation to be carried out have frequently gone unheard."

Official bodies involved in the investigations have stated that 40% of the cases are simply archived. A lack of training in investigative techniques -- including the failure to protect the crime scene or to gather necessary forensic or other evidence and the failure to follow up on possible crucial evidence -- the lack of technical resources and lack of coordination and cooperation between state institutions, has meant that many cases have never gone beyond the initial investigation stage.

On the 11th anniversary of the adoption of the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women, "Convention of Belém do Pará Amnesty International calls on the Guatemalan government to:

- Publicly condemn the abduction and murder of women and girls;
- Carry out immediate, coordinated, full and effective investigations into all cases of abduction and murder of women and girls in Guatemala and bring those responsible to justice;
- Strengthen and improve coordination and resource allocation for all state institutions dealing with violence against women -- particularly the Office of the Special Prosecutor for Crimes against Women of the Public Ministry;
- Develop and implement adequate warning and protection programs to prevent the abduction and murder of women.

**For a full copy of the report: "Guatemala: no protection, no justice: killings of women in Guatemala", please see: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAMR340172005>**

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