



Mexico Quietly Drops Border-Deaths Probe

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MONTERREY, Mexico -- Federal officials have quietly closed a three-year inquiry into the rape-strangulation of 14 women and teenagers in the border city of Juarez, leaving relatives with little hope the killings will ever be solved.

The federal Attorney General's Office intervened in 2003, promising it would try to solve cases plagued for years by allegations of state police corruption and incompetence.

Federal prosecutors privately returned the cases to state authorities in June because they didn't find evidence of a federal crime, according to the Chihuahua state prosecutor's office. The federal Attorney General's Office didn't respond to repeated requests from The Associated Press for comment.

The victims' families weren't told the investigation had been closed; they read it in the local newspaper.

"It fills me with rage, with a feeling of impotence, because they never investigated anything," said Josefina Gonzalez, whose 20-year-old daughter's remains were found with those of seven other young women in 2001.

In addition to those eight killings, federal authorities also dropped investigations into the slayings of six teenagers, aged 15 to 18. They were among about 100 young women who were sexually assaulted, strangled and dumped in the desert outside Juarez since 1993.



Crosses are seen in memory of the women who were raped and strangled in the border city of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico on Tuesday March 14, 2006. Mexican federal officials have quietly closed an unsuccessful, three-year investigation into the cases of 14 women who were raped and strangled in Juarez, leaving little hope authorities will ever solve a string of killings so brutal they attracted worldwide attention and inspired at least two Hollywood movies. (AP Photo/Guillermo Arias) (Guillermo Arias - AP)

Relatives of the victims have long demanded President Vicente Fox do more to solve the killings in the city of about 1.3 million people across the border from El Paso, Texas. Police made many arrests, but the killings continued.

Movie stars like Jane Fonda and Sally Field took part in a 2004 protest to demand justice for the victims. The killings also inspired two as-yet-unreleased movies, including one starring Jennifer Lopez.

Over the years, police have suspected a serial killer, gangs or even organ-smugglers in the deaths. But no strong evidence has emerged to support the theories.

In Mexico, murder is a state, not a federal crime. But after the victims' relatives said state investigators were inept and corrupt, federal officials jumped into the investigation of the 14 killings in 2003 to see if there was evidence of a federal offense, such as organ trafficking or organized crime.

The federal government's involvement in the 14 cases failed to pacify critics, leading Fox to establish a Juarez-based special prosecutor's office in January 2004 to monitor all investigations into the killings and look for possible gaps.

Guadalupe Lopez Urbina, the first special federal prosecutor assigned to Juarez, recommended criminal charges against dozens of current and former law enforcement officers for alleged negligence in handling the cases. However, only two state investigators were charged with negligence, and a judge later threw out the cases.

State officials claimed they solve the majority of female homicides, but contended they lack the resources and training to deal with these killings, which appeared related to one another.

"In these cases, it is evident that state authorities were incapable and unwilling to provide justice," said Eric Olson, a Latin America expert at Amnesty International USA. "It is then the federal authorities' obligation to provide safety, security and justice for their citizens."

In January, the Attorney General's Office created a national prosecutor for crimes against women headquartered in Mexico City. The Juarez office became one of three regional offices.

The same day the national office was announced, federal authorities released a final report saying the slayings of women in Juarez were not serial killings and that the city was not even the most dangerous in Mexico in terms of the killings of women.

Critics say the Fox administration is apparently washing its hands of the matter.

"At this point our best bet is to look for international justice," said Marisela Ortiz of Bring Our Daughters Home, a group of victims' relatives.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights agreed in March to investigate allegations that state officials planted evidence and failed to go after the real killers.

"We're back to square one, but I no longer believe the killers will ever be found," said Gonzalez, one of three mothers who filed the accusations with the commission. "If there is no justice here, there will be divine justice."

On the Net:

Inter-American Commission on Human Rights: <http://www.cidh.org>

Our Daughters Back Home: <http://www.mujeresdejuarez.org/>