

Street Children Murders Peak on Weekends

by Laura Vargas

Being young and bearing a tattoo appear to be sufficient to make one a target for killers in Honduras, where the massacre of street children and youths continues with at least 10 victims each weekend.

"An average of 10 bodies are found in different parts of the country every weekend," particularly in Tegucigalpa and in San Pedro Sula, the country's industrial centre, said Bertha Oliva, director of the Honduran Committee of Families of the Detained and Disappeared (CFDD).

"Here, it is a crime to be young, and it is enough for a boy to have a tattoo for him to become a target. Sometimes it even looks as if they were tattooed after they were killed," she said.

The situation has the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) on alert. IACHR, which is an autonomous body of the Organisation of American States, is pressing the government of right-winger Ricardo Maduro to do everything to investigate the "summary executions" of an estimated 1,300 children and youths in the past five years.

Some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) specialising in human rights placed the number at more than 2,500 minors, mostly street children, who have been shot to death in extrajudicial killings since 1998. The groups complain that the authorities have yet to show any progress in their efforts to find the perpetrators.

Violence against minors has reached such an extreme in Honduras lately that the killers drive their cars past crowds of people and toss out a part of the victim's body, like a hand, a foot, or even an eye, says Oliva.

The activist said that among the police in charge of the investigations, there are officers "who are clearly identified" as former members of what is known as "Battalion 3-16," a death squad that operated in the 1980s when the country was ending two decades of military dictatorship.

The Centre for Justice and International Law, and Casa Alianza, an international non-governmental group that works with abandoned children, continue to submit cases involving murdered Honduran children to the IACHR, and in most,

government agents are implicated as the perpetrators.

Susana Villarán, the IACHR special rapporteur for children's rights, visited Honduras last August to assess the situation of violence. She described the situation she found "extremely grave."

"These events merit immediate and appropriate attention from the authorities, because the state has the obligation to individualise and investigate these crimes," Villarán said.

President Maduro, who took office in January 2002, promised to attend to the situation with the diligence it deserves, but the human rights organisations say the government "has done little or nothing in this respect."

Some officials blame the rising death toll on disputes between youth gangs, known in this Central American country as *maras*, which official figures show to involve some 32,000 minors.

But experts say the problem is directly related to the country's difficult social situation, as 65 percent of the Honduran population of 6.3 million live in poverty.

The streets of the prin-

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The World Health Organisation benchmarks a society with 10 or more homicides per 100,000 inhabitants annually "at risk." That limit is far surpassed by some urban areas of Honduras, such as the capital, where 51 homicides are reported for every 100,000 inhabitants, and San Pedro Sula, where the rate reaches 95 homicides per 100,000 people each year.

capital cities are filled with abandoned children. Many wander about with plastic bags or bottles containing common solvent-based glue, a substance they inhale that serves to suppress hunger and cold.

According to UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), there are 40 million street children in Latin America, and more than half inhale glue, which causes brain damage and even sudden death.

Casa Alianza reports that 90 to 95 percent of the street children in the Honduran capital sniff glue.

The panorama of widespread poverty, which hits children the hardest because 51 percent of Hondu-

rans are under 18, goes hand-in-hand with the fact that Honduras is considered one of the most violent in Latin America.

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According to Tomás Sandino, the local coordinator of Save the Children, an international NGO, a study of the murders of children

and youths shows that just 36 percent of the victims were gang members or had criminal records.

Sandino added that it was difficult to quantify the murders committed since 1998, because different ages were found in different victim lists, but it is estimated that in the last five years, more than 2,000 people under age 30 were assassinated.

"Apart from the number of deaths, what is shocking is the apathy of the criminal justice system towards these cases," he said.

An investigative commission set up by the government last year, says Sandino, convened only two sessions, and has not met since.

Six of the child killings are being investigated by the IACHR. "Unless the murders are investigated in Honduras, we have no other option but to ask the IACHR to intervene," said Bruce Harris, director of Casa Alianza's Latin American Programmes.

The IACHR and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights are en-

trusted with ensuring the application of the American Convention on Human Rights.

The cases that Casa Alianza has brought against the Honduran government are justified, under the terms of the IACHR, by the foot-dragging of the country's justice system to investigate the six murders and its failure to apply the articles of the Convention, such as the rights to personal integrity and freedom, the rights of the child, and right to life.

CFDD's Oliva reported that Honduran human rights groups are now considering the possibility of creating their own "truth, justice and reparations commission" to bring to light the human rights violations committed in Honduras since the 1980s. Participating in this effort are numerous NGOs, and even the armed forces, with backing from the United Nations.

Since 1993, there have been 184 reports of forced disappearances, but the number of cases to be investigated would depend on what period of time the commission decides it will cover, said Oliva. "Ideally, it would include all of the human rights crimes committed until now," the activist added.

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