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## House Tackles "Femicide" in Latin America

By William Fisher

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While headlines in the mainstream media front-page such controversies as Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Syria and lawmakers' standoff with the White House on timelines for American withdrawal from Iraq, the more mundane - but arguably no less important - work of the Congress goes on. Much of it continues under the radar, receiving little or no attention in the press. Some of it is actually bipartisan!



One example is an obscure measure known as H.RES.100. What is House Resolution 100?

It is an effort by a large bipartisan group of representatives to try to end a deadly phenomenon known as "femicide" in Guatemala and elsewhere in Central and South America.



Introduced by Congresswoman Hilda L. Solis (D-California) and 84 co-sponsors, and unanimously approved by the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, the resolution urges the US government to bring pressure on Guatemala to address the unsolved murders of more than 2,000 women and girls since 2001.

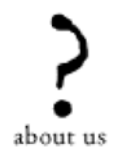


Representative Solis says, "Very few of these crimes have been investigated, and even fewer perpetrators have been brought to justice for their crimes. Families of victims deserve honest answers and investigations into the murders of their wives, mothers and daughters, instead of being ignored and intimidated. H.RES.100 will raise awareness of the growing murder rate of women and girls in Guatemala, and increase the international pressure that is needed to stop the violence against women in that country."

It is not known whether President Bush raised the issue with Guatemalan leaders during his recent trip to Latin America.



Efforts to raise awareness of femicide have been spearheaded by numerous immigration and human rights organizations. Chief among them is the Center for Gender and Refugee Studies, University of California, Hastings College of Law in San Francisco, working in partnership with Guatemalan groups.



Asked by Truthout why the US government should take an interest in this issue, the Center's advocacy coordinator and communications director, Felecia Bartow, noted that, in addition to human rights concerns, "The US has provided millions of dollars in aid for Rule of Law programs in Guatemala - and yet the murders and impunity persist. In 2006, the Guatemalan government created the National Institute of Forensic Science (INACIF) to improve criminal investigations and to prosecute those who commit crimes, including the murders of women. To date, the Guatemalan Congress has not provided INACIF with a budget and has not appointed any personnel - despite the fact that the State Department allocated \$250,000 to INACIF in its FY2007 budget, and the institute has asked for another \$250,000 that would come out of the FY2008 budget.

She added that the US government has thus "not done enough" to address the issue of femicide. "The State Department needs to make it clear to the Guatemalan government that this situation cannot persist. There has been concern expressed about violence against women in Guatemala generally, but there have not been steps taken to hold the Guatemalan government accountable for the state of impunity that exists for those who murder women," she told Truthout.

Femicide is also a problem elsewhere in Latin America. Last year, Bolivia, Peru, Colombia, Mexico and Guatemala sent a delegation of activists to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in Washington to focus attention on the murders of innocent women.

The delegation asserted that, "In addition to the deaths in Guatemala, incomplete murder rates presented to the Commission cite 373 known murders of women in Bolivia from 2003 to 2004, and 143 in Peru during 2003. In Colombia, a woman is reportedly killed every six days by her partner or ex-partner. Ciudad Juarez and Chihuahua City, Mexico, two cities where the femicide trend was first widely noticed, have suffered the murder of more than 500 women from multiple causes since 1993, according to press and other sources. Dozens more remain missing. Globally, the problem is no less severe. In many parts of South Asia and the Middle East, for example, so-called 'honor killings' usually go unpunished."

In a joint letter to prospective supporters of the Solis resolution, Karen Musalo, director of the Center for Gender and Refugee Studies, and Barb Gottlieb, director of outreach and membership for the Women's Edge Coalition, said, "As of August 2006, 2,300 Guatemalan women had been murdered since the beginning of 2000, and only 17 cases had been resolved, including both convictions and exonerations. In fact, so few convictions have been handed down that there is almost complete impunity for those who murder women in Guatemala. Investigators mishandle crime scenes and officials blame the victims themselves, often deciding that their murders are not worth investigating because they are deemed to be 'nobodies.'"

The organizations said, "During Guatemala's decades of internal armed conflict, state-sponsored violence was widespread, and rape was commonly used as a weapon of war against women. Numerous investigations have concluded that the vast majority of these human rights violations were conducted by members of the Guatemalan Army or intelligence services. Today, a decade after the conflict's resolution, many of those responsible have escaped prosecution and now work with the police or private security forces. Perhaps it is no wonder that violence against women continues unabated, and that the perpetrators are virtually never brought to justice."

The original cosponsors of the House Resolution include Rep. Tom Lantos (D-California), chair of the full House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Rep. Eliot Engel (D-New York), chair of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, and Rep. Dan Burton (R-Indiana), ranking member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere. Representative Burton introduced a similar resolution in the 109th Congress last year, but it did not come to a vote before the end of the year.

Consideration of the Solis resolution by the full House is expected in the coming months. A similar resolution is expected to be introduced in the Senate.

The Solis resolution is endorsed by numerous human rights and legal organizations, including Amnesty International, the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN), Human Rights First, and the Center for Gender and Refugee Studies.

The Hastings Center's Karen Musalo told Truthout, "The brutal murders of thousands of women with total impunity has gone on for all too long, and we are grateful that the House of Representatives has now gone on record calling for the Guatemalan government to bring an end to this disgraceful impunity."

The plight of women in Latin America and elsewhere is exacerbated by the absence of US immigration regulations that would grant asylum to victims of domestic violence.

In a highly publicized case, a Guatemalan refugee named Rodi Alvarado became the poster child for this immigration dilemma. Mrs. Alvarado's husband, a former soldier in the Guatemalan military, brutally beat her over a period of 10 years while the Guatemalan police and courts ignored her repeated attempts to get help. When she ran away, her husband found her and beat her unconscious. Finally, in 1995, she fled to the US in search of safety.

An immigration judge granted her asylum, but that decision was reversed by the Board of Immigration Appeals. Two successive attorneys general - Janet Reno and John Ashcroft - have personally intervened, but her case has yet to be decided.

Ashcroft said a decision should await new regulations from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which supervises most immigration matters. But DHS and the Department of Justice have been unable to agree on a position.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Alvarado remains in legal limbo. She continues to work as a housekeeper at a convent in San Francisco. The DHS says it will not press for her deportation regardless of how much longer it may take the agency to finalize the new regulations. But while she can remain in the US, she cannot be reunited with her children, who remain in Guatemala.

The government started working on such regulations many years ago, long before the DHS was created. Under US law, asylum applicants have to show they can't go home because they face persecution because of religion, race, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. In a regulation proposed during the Clinton administration by Attorney General Janet Reno, battered women would have been considered members of a social group.

But with the change in administrations and the September 11, 2001 attacks, the proposal languished. Opponents have said new asylum rules would lead to a surge in claims - an assertion disputed by advocates.

According to Human Rights First, an advocacy group that has worked on the Alvarado case for several years, "The DHS has been very sympathetic to the plight of abused women and girls. It believes this very narrow category of asylum-seekers should be able to enter the US to escape abuse."

HRF adds, "For reasons that are difficult to understand, the Justice Department has seemed to be dragging its feet on completing new regulations to make this possible, although they have received a lot of positive bipartisan support, including support from conservative advocacy and religious groups."

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*William Fisher has managed economic development programs in the Middle East and in many other parts of the world for the US State Department and USAID for the past thirty years. He began his work life as a journalist for newspapers and for The Associated Press in Florida. Go to [The World According to Bill Fisher](#) for more.*



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