

Transvestite killings on the rise in Guatemala



By Mica Rosenberg

Wed Nov 22, 7:14 PM ET

Two transvestites were shot dead in broad daylight on Wednesday, their bodies riddled with bullets in the latest in a wave of suspected hate crimes in Guatemala.

The transvestites, in their 20s, were gunned down together outside a bar in the crime-ridden Villanueva neighborhood of the capital. They were shot in the face and body.

"They both had long hair and long nails, men dressed as if they were women," said emergency worker Oscar Sanchez. At least 15 bullet casings lay on the ground at the murder scene.

Hate crimes have grown this year in Guatemala, an often macho and extremely violent society still scarred by a long civil war that killed 200,000 people and ended 10 years ago.

Oasis, a gay rights group, said 11 transgender people have been murdered so far this year, compared to seven the year before, and no one has been arrested for the crimes.

Gabriel Ixcoy, an 18-year-old transgender prostitute known as Shakira, was shot dead in September for refusing the sexual advances of a young gang member. He reportedly cut out Shakira's tongue.

Guatemala is one of the most violent countries in Latin America with over 5,300 people murdered in 2005 -- a murder rate of around 40 per 100,000 people. The rate in the United States is 5.6 murders per 100,000, according to the FBI.

While the number of Guatemalan transvestites killed is minimal compared to the overall murder figure, rights workers are increasingly focusing on the killings of women, gays and other vulnerable groups.

POLICE INVOLVED

Police are rarely interested in finding the killers of transvestites and are sometimes involved themselves, gay rights activists say.

In December last year, Juan Pablo Mendez, or Paulina, was killed and another transgender prostitute was wounded by three people witnesses identified as uniformed police officers.

"The general level of violence in Guatemala has increased exponentially over the past few years with most crimes going unpunished," said Sebastian Elegueta, a Central America researcher for Amnesty International.

"But it's the most vulnerable groups in society, like women, sex workers or transgender people, that are targeted first and those that are afforded the least amount of protection from the state," he said.

Oasis Director Jorge Lopez said transsexuals are particularly at risk because the majority work as prostitutes, trawling the dangerous streets of Guatemala's old city in short mini-skirts, wigs and platform heels.

"Transgender people end up in sex work because they've been kicked out of their homes, their schools, their jobs," said Lopez. "The only options left for them to make a living is prostitution or working in a hair salon."

Many of the transvestite prostitutes loitering on the corners of the capital come from other Central American countries, said Lopez.

"People throw eggs at us, call us names, shoot at us," said Claudia, a 21-year-old Nicaraguan transgender prostitute out on a corner past midnight in black fishnet stockings, a ruffled white skirt and bright blue eye shadow.

"The police are the worse. They sometimes force us to rob clients so they can take their cut," she said.

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