

6th July 2010, Guatemala city - Very early one recent morning in the eastern Guatemalan municipality of Esquipulas, the residents slept soundly -- until heart-rending screams from the street broke the calm.

It was José Gómez Ramírez, 12, and he was pleading for his life.

On Jun. 15, while the boy slept, a group of criminals broke into his house in the Loma Linda district, dragged him from his bed and into a nearby street. Shortly afterwards, gunshots were heard, and his voice was silenced forever.

According to the police, Gómez had witnessed a crime, and the perpetrators went after him to keep him from testifying against them.

The case is representative of the violence that permeates the lives of children and youths in what is known as Central America's Northern Triangle, made up of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. There, deaths are tallied by the hundreds.

In Guatemala alone, 189 children 17 and younger were killed between January and May. In other words, 7.8 percent of the 2,413 violent deaths -- 16 daily - - reported in that period, according to the research and analysis board of the Human Rights Prosecutor's Office and the National Civil Police.

"Those deaths in any developed country in the world would have people protesting in the streets, but here we do nothing," Nidia Aguilar, a Child and Youth legal defender, told IPS.

People are so desperate, in her opinion, that when minors are killed, instead of facing the problem, they accuse the children of belonging to criminal gangs -- a sign of society's "terrible indifference."

Citizen participation in politics and in pressing the Guatemalan government to meet its obligations is essential for reversing this situation, said Aguilar.

Guatemala has laws on the books to protect children and adolescents, regulate adoption and punish sexual violence, exploitation and child trafficking, but the laws "are increasingly just paper," she said.

Strengthening the justice system in a country where nearly 100 percent of crimes goes unpunished "is essential, because otherwise the gangs will go on taking advantage of the situation to commit their offences," she added.

Marco Antonio Castillo, director of the non-governmental Ceiba Group, which for 20 years has worked on preventing juvenile delinquency, said in a conversation with IPS that rampant violence here is the result of structural injustice.

Impunity, poverty and the lack of opportunity are determining factors that must be addressed if the violence is to be reduced, he said.

According to the annual report of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, released Jun. 23, "the Northern Triangle of Central America has the highest murder rate of any region in the world," surpassing even Mexico.

The homicide rate from 2003 to 2008 in Mexico was 12 per 100,000 inhabitants, compared to 61 per 100,000 in Honduras, 52 per 100,000 in El Salvador and 49 per 100,000 in Guatemala -- many victims were children.

Ismelda Villacorta, of the non-governmental FESPAD, which researches the application of the law in El Salvador, said that in her country of 5.7 million people, at least 12 murders are reported daily, of which two involve children.

Other factors, such as domestic violence and "structural violence" (which she defined as the impossibility of living a decent life with the right to health, food and education), lead to labour exploitation, dropping out of school and other problems that leave children vulnerable.

In 2009 in El Salvador, 606 children under 18 were killed -- 284 more than in 2008.

"It is essential to work towards violence prevention, create integrated policies that build respect for human rights, and promote recovery and reinsertion of youths into society," according to Villacorta.

Ubaldo Herrera, of the non-governmental Casa Alianza in Honduras, said violence against children has increased in his country also as a result of the expansion of organised crime and gangs and the weak justice system.

According to Casa Alianza, by May at least 157 children and youths under age 23 had been murdered so far this year in Honduras, where an average of 14 people die violent deaths each day.

The Honduran Congress has a legislative bill that would reduce the age from 18 to 16 for punishing minors as adults for violent crimes, but debate has come to a halt due to public opposition.

Instead of that approach, Herrera said he believes in programmes for preventing juvenile delinquency and drug use, and is fighting for a juvenile justice system that ensures the recovery and social reinsertion of young offenders.

Source: [IPS](#)