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In Colombia, rape now being prosecuted as weapon of war

**In May 2007, only 12 cases of sexual violence were filed with prosecutors appointed to carry out Colombia's special Justice and Peace Law. Today that number stands at 228.**

By Sibylla Brodzinsky | *Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor*

*BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA*

Amelia had spent years counseling a woman who was raped by a right-wing warlord and suffered an unwanted pregnancy. So when the woman called her for advice after the warlord threatened to return to take away the child, Amelia rushed to go see her.

The two women stayed up late discussing how to protect the child in an isolated farmhouse in Colombia's Antioquia Province. Suddenly, three masked gunmen burst into the house and warned Amelia to "stop messing in other people's business." The men then raped both women.

"They said I should take this as a warning," Amelia says, adding that the men had told her not to leave the house for three days. When she left, she told no one what had happened to her.

"I had insisted so much for other victims to report crimes, but I felt paralyzed by fear. I was too afraid to say anything," says Amelia, a nervous woman in her early 40s, who asked that her real name not be used. Suddenly she understood on a whole new level why the victims she'd counseled had resisted reporting their attacks.

In the conflicts in eastern Congo, Sudan's Darfur region, Serbia, and

Rwanda, the widespread systematic raping of women has been well documented. In Colombia, however, the scale of rape and sexual violence as part of the four-decade-old conflict is largely unknown.

Local and national women's organizations say there are thousands of cases of sexual violence – by right-wing paramilitaries and leftist guerrillas – that go unreported by women too afraid to talk. But now, the groups are campaigning to make women aware of their rights as victims and to push prosecutors to question paramilitaries about sexual violence.

It seems to be working. In May 2007, there were only 12 cases of sexual violence filed with prosecutors appointed to carry out Colombia's special Justice and Peace Law. Today there are 228.

"The problem is not yet being seen in its full dimension," says Patricia Buriticá, who leads an NGO known as Women's Peace Initiative, which offers psychological and legal assistance to victims of sexual violence.

## **SEXUAL VIOLENCE AS A WEAPON OF WAR**

Sexual violence was a constant in every massacre carried out by paramilitary forces as they expanded their control throughout the country between 1997 and 2005, says Ms. Buriticá, who has travelled throughout Colombia interviewing women and survivors of massacres about the level of sexual violence. There are hundreds of stories of women being raped, sexually tortured, and mutilated before being killed.

Once they established control, the paramilitaries would often use village women as sex slaves. In one town in Cauca Province, there are so many children of paramilitary fighters that they are known locally as the

"paraquitos" or "little paramilitaries." In Magdalena Province, warlord Hernán Giraldo was known as "El Taladro" or "The Drill" and reportedly would summon a different woman each night. "A shop owner refused to send his wife to Giraldo and he was killed the next day," Buriticá says.

Paramilitary commanders have said that most were isolated cases of their men getting out of hand.

But Buriticá says testimonies she's collected show the practice was systematic and widespread, despite the extremely low numbers of reported cases. A 2006 report by a special rapporteur of the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights said: "The actors in Colombia's armed conflict, particularly the paramilitaries and guerrillas, use physical, sexual, and psychological violence against women as a strategy of war."

## VICTIMS OFTEN DON'T SEE RAPE AS PART OF WAR

Part of the problem is that the women don't recognize themselves as victims of the conflict. Buriticá says she has seen countless cases where women report the murders of their husbands, disappearances of their fathers, or torture of their brothers but don't talk about what happened to them. "There was one woman who reported a murder and it took two years of therapy to get her to report her own rape," Buriticá says.

Based on her research, Buriticá believes the number of women who have been sexually abused during the war could be in the thousands, and those are just the crimes committed by the paramilitaries. Women and girls recruited as fighters by leftist rebels often end up as sex slaves to

commanders, according to women who have fled.

The numbers also don't include women like Amelia. Because she was raped after the peace deal with the paramilitaries in 2003, her case does not fall under the purview of the special prosecutors.

Shortly after she was raped, Amelia realized she was pregnant. But she subsequently miscarried. Months after her attack, she gathered enough courage to report her rape. "I heard my own voice telling victims: 'If you don't report it, other cases will follow and impunity will be complete,'" she recalls. "I could go around telling others to report and not report myself."

Fearing retaliation after telling her story to police in her town, she left her family to hide in the anonymity offered by the sprawling Colombian capital, Bogotá.

The woman who was raped beside Amelia has not reported it to police, and though she was questioned as a witness to Amelia's attack, she did not mention her own. "It's her second rape and she still refuses to report it," Amelia says. "I asked her 'How many more times will you have to be raped before you start talking?'"

Amelia hopes that her decision to report her rape will embolden other women in her town and across Colombia to do the same. "The more we are, the stronger we are," she says. But she fears that the fact that she had to leave will have the opposite effect. "I'm sure the women in my town are talking about the price I had to pay for talking," she says. "I don't think I'll be able to go back home for a very long time."

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