



—Timothy Ross/JB Pictures

A captured teen mugger pleads for his life to an off-duty policeman. Later, the boy was reported by other policemen to have been shot. The policeman was subsequently investigated for possible involvement in extra-judicial killings, and resigned from the National Police.

Deadly 'social cleansing' hits Latino poor

Police are killing kids in Colombia, Brazil

By **LESLIE WIRPSA**
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BOGOTÁ, Colombia — An unusual group of people marching through the city streets paralyzed traffic in downtown Bogotá one day in late September. Dressed in rags, sniffing glue and pushing carts jammed with paper and cardboard, the most marginalized members of Colombian society — paper recyclers, beggars, thieves, street dwellers and prostitutes — clamored, "We are not disposable human beings. We are citizens."

This motley crowd of several hundred had joined together to bury Miguel Angel Martinez, a 58-year-old street dweller who was beaten to death by two Colombian policemen. But the protesters were also resisting a genre of violence that has brought augmenting terror to the poorest of the poor in Latin American countries such as Colombia and Brazil in recent years. It is called "social cleansing" in the disturbing lingo of human rights organizations.

Social cleansing consists of serial killings of people who have been economically pushed so far toward the fringes of misery that the more affluent members of society classify them as "undesirable," "throwaway" human beings.

There were 505 social-cleansing murders registered by human rights monitors in Colombia in 1992. Ten percent of the documented victims were children under 18. Dozens more indigent people, however, were never recorded under this category of violence.

"A lot of unidentified bodies are never registered, and there are a lot of disappearances of indigents and thieves that never figure into the statistics," said Sonia Zambrano, from the Bogotá office of the Andean Commission of Jurists. "These kinds of murders are not given much pub-

licity, so the numbers fluctuate. Every day, these deaths are considered less and less important for society."

Paper collectors and common criminals are most frequently the victims of social cleansing in Colombia. But the phenomenon also affects prostitutes, beggars, street children, drug users, youth in poor barrios, homosexuals and transvestites.

In Brazil, meanwhile, social cleansing has hit street children and adolescents hardest: Four young people were killed each day on Brazilian streets between 1988 and 1990, according to U.S. human rights monitor Americas Watch. Most were black males between 15 and 17 years of age. In 1991 in Rio de Janeiro, a city of 7 million, 306 street kids were killed. And in São Paulo, with 12 million inhabitants, 674 minors were murdered that same year.

Poverty has pushed between 7 million

Private security guards from the Universidad Libre systematically killed the trash collectors then sold the bodies to the university medical school.

and 10 million kids into the Brazilian streets and many of them resort to petty theft to survive. Pegged as criminals who offer nothing to society but trouble, these youth are exterminated by death squads formed by members of the police and civilian businessmen.

A case in point was the massacre of street children in Rio de Janeiro on July 23. Gunmen from a vehicle fired indiscriminately at a group of approximately 40 children clustered in front of a bank. Eight were killed; three died under the arches of Rio's Candelaria Cathedral. The "Candelaria murders" sparked widespread international protests, drawing momentary attention to social-cleansing violence in Brazil. But people who work with street dwellers in São Paulo and Bogotá say this

type of killing is daily bread for indigent people.

Economic genocide

Human rights monitors agree that social-cleansing murders are part of a planned, systematic campaign against a specific group of people. One human rights advocate in Bogotá said social cleansing

Analysis

is a form of economic or social genocide aimed at wiping out or terrorizing a whole class of people because of their economic exclusion.

This genocide is supported by members of the police forces of both countries, numerous investigations show. All Colombian sources consulted — from government prosecutors to street children themselves — say the police are heavily involved in this strategy, either independently or through alliances with urban business entrepreneurs, political elites and industrialists. Even the U.S. State Department 1992 human rights report on Colombia recognized the frequent implication of police officers in social-cleansing murders.

Despite these widespread denunciations, the Clinton administration will prop up the Colombian National Police with \$25 million in fiscal year 1994 under the rubric of "antinarco" aid. In the past, security assistance sent to Colombia for antinarco purposes has never been closely monitored. There is only scant public record of just where U.S. security funds go when they enter the coffers of the Colombian National Police.

Specific cases and testimonies provide insight into the apparatus behind social cleansing in Colombia.

In July and August 1991, denunciations from Bucaramanga Archbishop Darío Castrillón Hoyos, then bishop of Pereira, brought attention to the serial murders

of trash collectors. During a period of 20 days, 60 homeless people and paper scavengers were shot dead in Pereira.

Originally, thanks to the commendable work of the prosecutor general's office, 38 police officers were linked to the campaign of slaughter. Of those investigated, 13 police officers and two undercover cops were dismissed from the force for beating and killing indigent people. There have been no further reports of legal action taken against the officers, however.

The Pereira case indicated that social cleansing is not just a policy carried out randomly by the police pulling triggers on the streets.

Tahi Barrios, the human rights delegate at the Colombian prosecutor general's office, investigates crimes and abuses committed by members of the security forces. "There are cases of social cleansing where I must conclude that complicity reaches a certain level of the police force command," Barrios told *NCR*. "In the Pereira murders, for example, the metropolitan police commander either ordered the killings of the indigent people or he turned a blind eye to the whole affair."

More gruesome yet were the murders of scores of trash recyclers in the city of Barranquilla in March 1992. Private security guards from the Universidad Libre systematically killed the trash collectors then sold the bodies to the university medical school. One recycler who was beaten managed to escape and denounce the killings. It is not known how many garbage collectors were murdered, but investigators discovered 11 whole corpses in the medical school morgue and remains of at least 40 more. Two police officers were connected to the murders in preliminary investigations.

Prostitutes and homosexuals have also been mercilessly targeted in social-cleansing campaigns in Colombia. There are strong indications of heavy police involvement in violence against these two groups; however, officers have rarely been pros-

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Deadly

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 ecuted for abuses.

According to a May 1993 report from the Washington Office on Latin America titled "The Colombian National Police, Human Rights and U.S. Drug Policy," police commonly beat, sexually abuse, extort and sometimes kill male homosexuals and prostitutes in Bogotá. Police are known to take victims up the mountains surrounding the city to be murdered. Bodies are dumped down steep gullies.

Forced gentrification

Last August a campaign of social cleansing intensified in the center of Bogotá, bringing terror to the streets. Death threats were plastered to the walls of buildings in Los Martires, a downtown zone of prostitution and commerce also known for its high incidence of muggings. The threats — large manila posters printed professionally in red and black ink — invited indigent people and common delinquents to their own funerals. The "hosts" issuing the invitations included "businesspersons," "civic groups" and the "good people" of the community.

Of all of the social-cleansing killings registered in Bogotá in 1992, 50.4 percent took place in Los Martires, a zone of approximately 4,000 inhabitants.

Since the poster campaign began, dozens of young men have "disappeared" from the zone. "Many left because of fear. But we suspect many more were carted away and murdered," said one social worker.

A woman who works with marginalized people in Bogotá said she believes the campaign has been organized by neighborhood politicians, the police and businesspersons from the downtown area. She pointed out that several months before the posters appeared, the Bogotá Chamber of Commerce began a public campaign to "recuperate" the center of the city from the grip of crime.

"From that point on, the deputy mayors of the city started talking about 'cleaning up' and 'eradicating' delinquents," the woman, who requested anonymity, explained. "The information we have is that the idea

of the campaign in Los Martires was born during a meeting attended by local businesspersons, the deputy mayor from the zone and a high-ranking police commander."

She said that there have been two or three murders a day in a neighborhood that borders Los Martires since the poster campaign began in August. "Many of these bodies do not show up in this zone. They are carted away to other parts of the city or dumped in the gullies and on the hillsides or simply 'disappeared,'" she added. "This way, the killings don't look like massacres."

Ironically, storeowners blame government inefficiency and negligence for the cleanup campaigns and rampant violence in the downtown area. "The social-cleansing violence stems from a lack of legal guarantees. We pay our industry and commerce taxes and the government is supposed to keep the streets lit and provide a safe atmosphere for business," a restaurant owner said. "But the government does not keep its part. It is incapable of fulfilling its role as the regulator of peaceful coexistence among citizens."

Many businesspersons said crime in Bogotá's downtown has put a severe dent in business in recent years. Armed robberies are common, muggings have scared customers away. Because of government negligence, the storeowners said, small entrepreneurs have begun to take matters into their own hands or support police violence against thieves and indigent people.

A human rights advocate who requested anonymity said the government "recognizes the terrible problem of crime and insecurity. But it believes it cannot solve



—Timothy Ross/JB Pictures

Rubiela tends the grave of her boyfriend, killed by death squad gunmen in Bogotá, in the Central Cemetery.

this problem through legal channels. The Colombian jails are jammed full — there is nowhere to keep more prisoners. Rehabilitation is expensive. The government is in a conundrum about what to do with these people.

"It opts for two solutions: Eliminate them or confine them to ghettos, jails without doors. The police are involved in this. The whole apparatus of the government is involved in this."

Brazilian brutality

In Brazil the involvement of the police in social cleansing is well-documented. "Official investigations have revealed that off-duty policemen frequently participate in extermination groups that often kill minors," stated the Americas Watch report. In São Paulo, killings committed by on-duty officers from the military police have soared during the past five years. "It is apparent that the military police have taken it upon themselves to eliminate persons considered undesirable," Amer-

icas Watch affirmed.

Grassroots organizations and protests have played an important role in saving lives in Brazil. The tragedy of the killings of street children and indigent people would probably have been even greater than it is were it not for movements that have organized to defend the lives of the marginalized and protest against the bloodshed. Leaders of the Catholic church have been instrumental in denouncing social-cleansing violence against the Brazilian poor.

Even so, as in Colombia, impunity is the norm in Brazil when it comes to social-cleansing murders.

According to a U.S. missionary who works with street children in Brazil, impunity fuels the practice of social cleansing — police realize they can get away with murdering the marginalized, so they continue to do it. In this context, social-cleansing murders have escalated dramatically in Brazilian cities. For example, in São Paulo deaths of civilians during military police actions soared to 1,470 in 1992, up from 305 in 1987.

Here, too, many of the victims of unlawful police actions are youths who live on the streets and who run away when they see the police coming. Police often shoot them simply for running.

Moreover, social cleansing has racist connotations in Brazil. Black youths are targeted more than whites. A book cited by Americas Watch, *Rota 66*, by journalist Caco Barcellos, "found that in almost 4,000 cases of police killings in the last 20 years in which (Barcellos) could identify the race of the victim, 51 percent were black."

Americas Watch representative Ben Penglase said U.S. security assistance is not presently going directly to the Brazilian military police. Americas Watch reports, however, point out that the brutal practices of the military police are carryovers from the Brazilian dictatorship, which the United States supported.

"Although the military police are no longer coordinated by the armed forces as they were during the dictatorship, in other respects the (police) continue to have the quasi-military values and organization that they took on during the dictatorship," Americas Watch reported. ■

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