

Our View: Beacon of hope for women and girls in Latin America

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Mexico's military, which does much of what would be considered police work north of the border, protests that it has its hands too full chasing narcotraficantes to spend much time on the unsolved murders of hundreds of women and girls in Ciudad Juarez.

Local lawyer M.C. Sungaila and her colleagues who took the Mexican government to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in Costa Rica have long begged to differ. The indifference of the Mexican authorities to the heinous crimes over the last decade is a crime in itself, they have argued, and have taken up the case of the women and their families on a pro bono basis, as Sungaila described in a Perspectives essay in this newspaper last month.

The women and girls killed in the border city across the Rio Grande from El Paso are typically drawn there from southern Mexico to work in the many maquiladora factories set up under NAFTA guidelines to support inter-American trade. In that sense, none of us are innocent in the matter. Symbolically, the attorneys were standing up for all the victims. In the case, though, they represented the families of three of the victims, aged between 15 and 20 years old, whose murders were essentially not investigated at all by Mexico.

Last week the court ruled in the families' favor. Somewhat amazingly, the Mexican government has dropped any pretense of a defense. It has agreed to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars in damages to the families for its investigative failings. It must acknowledge those failings and - for what it's worth - erect a monument honoring the lives of the hundreds of women who have been slain.

"The government of Mexico reiterates its firm commitment to promoting and protecting human rights, in particular to combating violence against women and girls," the Interior Ministry said.

Given the nation's poverty and history of corruption, we can't say we are overwhelmingly optimistic that this ruling will entail a complete turnaround in the way that Mexico views the human rights of its citizens.

But let us take this small and yet important legal victory and let it stand as a beacon of hope for justice for women and children in Latin America. Let the lives of Claudia Ivette Gonzalez, Esmeralda Herrera Monreal and Laura Berenice Ramos Monarrez not have been lived in vain.

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