

## Fury and Impotence – Marcela Turati

*There are now hundreds, thousands of mothers, fathers, brothers, husbands, friends... who have dared to break down the deaf walls of Mexican “justice” to find, personally, the people they love. Whilst the authorities, with the synical step which all Mexicans know, respond with yet more synicism. Even when the bodies of some of the people reported disappeared are eventually localised, they are lost again due to the disarray, the lack of methodology and the indolence in the administration of morgues and graveyards.*

Beatriz Mejía Díaz returned for the umpteenth time to a morgue in Estado de México to ask they they show her the register of all the unidentified bodies which they had in their vaults.

“*Señora*, you have already come several times, your daughter is not in the register”, an employee tells her when she asks for the folders. Obstinate, she demands that they allow her to revise personally each of the reports to date since November 4<sup>th</sup> 2011, when her daughter Alejandra Viridiana Osornio Mejía disappeared, whether they were filed as men, children or the elderly.

Revising the documents from January 27<sup>th</sup> 2012, she found her. They had her there as an NI (*no identificada*, unidentified) and they had sent her to a mass (*fosa común*).

“I found my daughter's clothes. They told me that they had only her cranium and that I ought to go to the Medical Forensic Service (*Servicio Médico Forense*, Semefo) in Izcalli. But there they had lost her case file. In the morgue they couldn't find her clothes either. I don't understand: How is it possible that they sent her to a mass grave if I had made so many official reports and spent so much time searching for her?” she says, outside the Federal Attorney General's office (*Procuraduría General de la República*, PGR) where she had come to shout at the Attorney General, Jesús Murillo Karam, and the Interior Minister Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong, expressing her repugnance and rage for the torment suffered since her daughter of 21 years was kidnapped in the billiards bar *Victorias* in Cuautitlán.

She shouted at them as they announced, once again, the creation of the Unit for the Investigation and Search for Disappeared Persons (*Unidad de Investigación y Búsqueda de Personas Desaparecidas*).

“Since November 28<sup>th</sup> 2011 I have been searching the Semefos. I went to Tlanepantla, which is the main one in Estado de México, then to the one in Texcoco, in Ecatepec, in Amecameca and to Mexico City in the Doctores district. Nobody ever allowed me to revise the folders personally, the people in charge put the characteristics into the computer and then did their supposed search, until I demanded that they allow me to check myself, and there she was. This is what I've come to tell them here in the Attorney General's office: that how is it possible that my daughter could have passed so much time in a mass grave without anybody telling me anything”, says Beatriz Mejía, who minutes ago was shouting with fury and anguish.

She is accompanied by other mothers and fathers who have come face to face with the administrative disarray of the morgues and graveyards where the bodies decompose underground and in total anonymity due to the lack of expertise, the [unnecessary] bureaucracy and the institutionalised negligence. At least 24,000 bodies remain in mass graves waiting for a dignified burial, but due to this administrative disorder they suffer a double-disappearance: the first when they are kidnapped, the second when the forensic 'experts' classify them incorrectly, losing the belongings they carried, poorly registering their information in the computer or sending them to a mass grave, mixed in with many others, and many times without even registering their final location.

The same fate applied to Abril Selena Caldiño Rodríguez, disappeared on May 26<sup>th</sup> 2011, found dead a few days later in “a village near Tecámac” and sent to a mass grave. Two years later, last Mothers Day, the authorities discovered that the corpse of the fifteen-year-old had been classified as one of a 45-year-old mother, and they took weeks to find her, given that they had lost the investigative case file which indicated the graveyard where she was buried.

### **Disorder**

Instead of having a *quinceñera* (fifteenth birthday party), Bianca Edith Barrón Cedillo had a funeral, since last April her family identified the clothes and the physical traits of a corpse sent to a mass grave last year, one week after its

discovery, in which an 'expert' had classified it as that of a woman between 25 and 30 years-old. For this reason, when her mother asked the authorities to search for the body of a 15-year-old, nothing was found in their database in spite of the corpse having been found the day after her disappearance.

Then there is the case of *Barbie*, Bárbara Reyes, the youth of 17 years disappeared on August 8<sup>th</sup> 2011 in Tlalnepantla, whose remains were found 18 months later in a mass grave after her mother did the same: revised personally each dossier.

Her mother, Lourdes Muñiz, had begun a search campaign; she even ensured that the authorities of Estado de México dedicated a team for her search and offered a reward for information which might help to find her, but it simply didn't occur to the officials to check the registers in the morgues.

Another mother who has shared her torment suggested that Lourdes go to the Semefo where they found her: she was registered – by pen and ledger for lack of computers – as a woman of 18 years, whose body was localised kilometres away from where she was reportedly disappeared.

“I started in the Semefo in Izcalli, later I went to the one in Cuautitlán, and here I found that there was an unclaimed body of an apparently similar age, gender and other characteristics. They told me to go to Barrientos in order to see the photos and there I identified my daughter's clothes, her blouse and her trainers. I also took with me a plaster cast of her teeth, which were also similar [to those of the corpse]. Then we went to the state graveyard *La Loma*, in Cuautitlán, where we took three days to find her because the place was in total disarray: there were bodies mixed up, that had been previously in private or common graves, or that oughtn't have been there. They calculated that they would find her in the first few square metres, but they ended up digging up 64 square metres, and when it became complicated they told me that perhaps they would only be able to find the cranium, says Lourdes outside the PGR, where she is also shouting demands of justice for her daughter.

“The only thing that I recovered were the bones of my daughter, no clothes or anything else. Nobody knows anything”, she says, between annoyance and resignation. She addresses her daughter: “Today, after 20 months of arduous searching, of frustration, pain, tears... my little one we have found you, not as we – dad, mum, sisters, family and friends – had wanted (...) Please forgive us for our inefficiency and our delay of 19 months in finding you... but bad bureaucrats, who didn't do their jobs and who sent you to a mass grave in the worst conditions, got in our way... But it didn't matter; we finally found you and recovered you, as we had promised you we would do, and soon you will be alongside your grandmothers, grandfathers and uncles.”

The scandal of *Barbie* uncovered the cesspit in Estado de México, a true reflection of what is going on all over the nation. Because of the pressure from the mothers, the State has had to reveal photographs of all of the bodies. “All this process of seeing bodies is exhausting, devastating”, says Guillermina Hernández, mother of the 14-year-old adolescent Selena Giselle Delgado, disappeared on April 29<sup>th</sup> 2010 in Ecatepec.

“The Semefos have no proper structure, they put the age that they think the body has, without investigating. They don't have infrastructure, they don't register dates. If they save clothes, they lose them, they don't keep them together with the body”, says the woman who has also gone through all the graveyards such as the one in Texcoco, where she saw the unidentified bodies buried in the paths between the graves and the tombs, only classified with the dossier number on a piece of paper in a plastic bag. She has already visited Naucalpan, Texcoco, Iztapalapa and Barrientos. And nothing.

She considers that if her daughter was disappeared by the dentist who she identifies as responsible, the Government disappeared her again with their disorder, their incompetence, their negligence.

For this reason on May 27<sup>th</sup> she went to the PGR with other mothers searching for their disappeared daughters and sons, during the announcement of the specialised Unit which Osorio Chong had promised last February but which, as signalled in the protest, has only twelve public prosecutors (*Ministerios Públicos*) to search for thousands of people registered as disappeared or unlocated (*no localizadas*) – of them 27,000 correspond to the previous Government – and still doesn't have legal recognition, mandate, installations or budget.

The work in the morgues of the Semefo and in the graveyards is arduous. From 2006 to 2012 the PGR national

database of genetic profiles received 15,618 profiles of unidentified corpses which had met violent deaths, of which only 425 were identified, according to a report published by the newspaper *La Jornada* on January 2<sup>nd</sup>.

Thirteen states (Baja California Sur, Sinaloa, Durango, Coahuila, San Luis Potosí, Querétaro, Colima, Guerrero, Tabasco, Campeche, Yucatán, Quintana Roo y Oaxaca) still don't have genetic laboratories for the identification of corpses. What is more, in some of them the autopsies are carried out by private funeral parlours or in cemeteries, and in many cases the unidentified bodies are sent to mass graves with incomplete case files and without their digital fingerprints, photographic or genetic identification having been compared with the national information held by the PGR or the federal public security services. The criteria for exhumations and the treatment of unidentified corpses are unapproved.

The reporter Víctor Hugo Michel, of *Milenio*, revealed in October 2012 that municipal governments report that during the previous federal administration 24,000 unidentified corpses were sent to mass graves. According to official statistics, only 3% of murder victims who arrive at the graveyards unidentified are subsequently identified, as in the cases of Bianca, *Barbie* and Viridiana.

Currently each state had its own time limits, which range from one day to six months, in which they decide to send an unidentified body to the mass grave. Each municipality has its own regulations on how to classify the body and regarding the number of bodies which a grave can contain. Some remains are incinerated.

### **Humanitarian intervention**

The humanitarian crisis of so many disappeared people obliged the federal government to request help from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to intervene in Mexico and, amongst other things, take on the disorder which exists in the Semefos and the cemeteries, and which is currently an important impediment to finding people.

Last February 21<sup>st</sup> an agreement was signed so that the international organisation founded in 1863 might provide consultancy to the Mexican authorities.

The legal advisor of the Mexican delegation of the ICRC, Romarick Ferraro, begins his interview with Proceso indicating that the Committee's principles are neutrality, impartiality and independence, and that in every country where they work bilaterally (in agreement with the governments or with recognised armed groups) they maintain confidentiality. The reports which they produce will not be made public without the consent of the Mexican government.

He explains that the thematic branches of the humanitarian organisation in terms of the disappearance of people are prevention (avoiding disappearances), the clarification of the fate of the person (promoting mechanisms to establish the truth), information management (collecting and producing clear information), forensic identification and integral support for the families, as well as the strengthening of the authorities so that they might participate in the search. The Mexican Government will decide in which of these issues they require advise.

When asked what their function will be in Mexico, he insists: "The content is part of a confidential dialogue, we will advise the government in what it asks us to".

And although in armed conflicts, such as those in Colombia or Afghanistan, the ICRC is a interlocutor with armed actors such as the FARC or the Taliban, when asked whether in Mexico they will negotiate with drug cartels to clarify facts, he responds that in certain contexts dialogue "isn't achieved or can't be achieved if acceptable security conditions don't exist".

Alejandra Jiménez, a Colombian forensic odontologist who works as an advisor for the ICRC, explains that since 2010 the organisation has worked in Mexico with forensic teams from different states and in 2012 with the Directors of the Semefos of all of Mexico's 32 states. Their objective is to recommend best practises for the recovery of corpses, in which all of the forensic disciplines are developed and applied before the burial of the body, and to ensure professional and adequate documentation of cases with good photographs, digital fingerprints, physical characteristics, medical and dental records of the deceased and all of the clues which might help to establish their identity.

The idea is to create a national *antemortem* database (based on the reports of families and the information they provide) and another *postmortem* (records of the corpses), whose information will be exhaustive, compatible and trustworthy. For the past year Tlaxcala has been the pilot state for the application of this system donated by the ICRC and which requires a high level of training.

“The consolidation of these systems of information take a lot of time. In Colombia it took 15 years because it meant harmonising the processes which are the cement for information management”, explains Jiménez in interview.

The experts recognise that the situation here is complicated by the size of the country and by its federalisation, since the work of every region ought to be harmonised and unified. However, the conflict in the Balkans already imposed new challenges on the ICRC in the search for disappeared people, which have led them to develop this work further.

In their 150 years of history the organisation has worked on the exchange of lists of detained/disappeared people between groups or States, on the strengthening of national institutional capacities for the localisation of people, on the creation of databases with information provided by families, on the dialogue between all protagonist armed groups in a conflict and the Government in order to obtain information regarding people whose whereabouts is unknown, on ensuring communication between prisoners and their families, and on hostage liberation.

–What are you going to do in Mexico? –insists the reporter

–The idea is to work on all five branches with the authorities, but it will be them who decide where the emphasis will lie. We will show them the capacities which we have, other experiences in the world and our expertise, then the Government decides –responds Ferraro.

Meanwhile, Jiménez signals that in Mexico there is an evident need to work on information management at a national level, for which they will offer advise on the consolidation of the records. Regarding forensic affairs, she explains that adequate burials are required, individually if possible, in signed graves with reliable registry systems which allow families to obtain information thirty years on if necessary. But she advises that the search is not only for corpses, but more than anything of people who remain alive.

“There is nowhere like Mexico”, admits Ferraro. The humanitarian problems are the same, so too the needs of the families, but the way in which the phenomenon occurs is unprecedented. We are in a country with high levels of development and pronounced levels of violence.”

However, he says that he feels the future is promising if the Victims Law and the Law for the Register of Unlocated People can be applied, because they will ensure legal tools for prevention, clarification, restitution and support for the victims.

More than three months on from the signing of the agreement with the ICRC, the PGR and the National Attorneys Conference (*Conferencia Nacional de Procuradores de Justicia*) are about to launch the Protocol for Forensic Treatment and Identification (*Protocolo para el Tratamiento e Identificación Forense*) – to which this magazine had access – which hopes to standardise throughout the country “the criminal investigation, in forensic medicine and in human identification systems”, with the finality that the agents working in public prosecution have better work conditions.

The protocol, of more than 300 pages and written with the advise of the ICRC, signals in its introduction that it hopes to regulate the movement of bodies from the place they are found, the practise of autopsies and identification, and the determination of causes and circumstances of death. However, PGR officials admit, there doesn't currently even exist an official statistic regarding the number of cemeteries in the country.

## **Between graves**

Whilst the authorities develop new protocols whose application could take years, José Serrano travels the country searching for his son David Serrano Sandoval, a lawyer of 38 years kidnapped on June 16<sup>th</sup> 2012 in Lerma, Estado de México, by a cell of the criminal group *La Mano con Ojos* and later by the *Cártel Independiente de Acapulco*. Although from the start his family had help from the Federal Police anti-kidnapping group, the lawyer's release was

never achieved.

As of this year, the PGR Sub-Attorney's office for Human Rights (*Subprocuraduría de Derechos Humanos*) has advised three fathers who confirm that their sons passed through one Semafo or another, whether that be in Mexico City, Estado de México or Guerrero. On one occasion the Special Prosecutor Rosario Sandoval, of the SIEDO, informed erroneously that one father's son had been found in Mexico City.

“Since August 15<sup>th</sup>, when the negotiations with the kidnappers ceased, I started to go to Semafos: to the three in Mexico City, Cuernavaca and Toluca; to the hospitals, to see whether he had been badly hurt, I went to see patients from bed to bed. I continue to go to these places, I have seen corpses which they showed me in Lerma, Toluca, Zihuatanejo, Acapulco and Chilpancingo”, says Serrano.

His search has been agonising: from Lerma, where they don't have refrigerated beds, they told him to look in Toluca and there they showed him dossiers with photographs of around 100 corpses: whole (natural deaths or road accidents) and decapitated or mutilated. They also invited him to see four bodies in the refrigerated zone.

In Zihuatanejo he visited the private funeral parlour which serves as a Semafo and saw two bodies which did not have any information, such as the date the body entered the Semafo or an estimated age, everything was based on the memory of the person in charge. From there they channelled him to Acapulco, where Serrano saw 50 dossiers of recovered corpses (30 of them from the La Peña del Chivo clandestine graves) until he found the dossier of a tall man, of 35 to 39 years of age, without wisdom teeth. He thought it might be his son and went to Chilpancingo to request the genetic record taken from the body and its dossier. Currently he is waiting for confirmation that it is his son.

“I'd like to leave Chilpancingo with something, not because I want to force them to give me that body, but to know whether I ought to continue investigating”, says this father outside the PGR, both sad and hopeful after following the trail of deaths and passing through the labyrinths of the bureaucratic inefficiency which disappears people for the second time.

[Marcela Turati](#) is a journalist for the respected Mexican magazine [Proceso](#), and founder of the group [Periodistas de a Pie](#), an organisation which prepares journalists to defend their security, create protection networks and establish strategies to avoid censorship. In October she will receive the 2013 Human Rights Prize from [Washington Office on Latin America](#) (WOLA).

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