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Guatemalan police accused in transvestite murders

17 Feb 2006 03:09:23 GMT

Source: Reuters

By Mica Rosenberg

GUATEMALA CITY, Feb 16 (Reuters) - Guatemala's human rights ombudsman said on Thursday he believed four police officers were behind the shooting last December of two transvestite sex workers, one of whom was killed.

The uniformed officers on police motorcycles shot Juan Pablo Mendez, known as Paulina, and Kelvin Josue Robles, or Sulma, and left them for dead on Dec. 17 near the old center of Guatemala City, human rights ombudsman Sergio Morales said.

Paulina died in the hospital, while Sulma survived with a partly paralyzed right arm and a bullet wound to the face.

Witnesses allegedly saw policemen return to the scene of the crime to remove evidence, said Jorge Lopez, director of the gay rights organization Oasis.

The accusation came days after government officials implicated police in a spate of brutal vigilante murders that rights activists have termed "social cleansing."

The police have not responded to the latest accusations or named the officers accused. Neither police nor Interior Ministry officials were available for comment

"I'm afraid to go out now because of what happened. People see us and they want to kill us," Sulma told Reuters through a wired-shut jaw, while at the Security Ministry to make a formal complaint.

"Society doesn't accept us, there's discrimination and exploitation. Prostitution is the only way to survive."

Sulma, looking bruised but well groomed with drawn-on eyebrows and long fingernails, began working as a prostitute shortly after being kicked out of the house at 16 for being gay.

Oasis estimates there are some 2,500 transgender sex workers in Guatemala, more than 200 of them working in the capital.

Seven transgender sex workers were murdered last year, including Paulina, it said. Some were shot, others raped and beaten to death with bats.

"These sex workers are seen as a disagreeable part of society so

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police are focused on trying get this element off the streets," said Joanna Grundy a researcher at Amnesty International. "The fact that they are engaged in illegal activity makes them more vulnerable."

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Transgender populations are particularly at risk in Central American countries where the society tends toward machismo and homophobia, she added.

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