

## International

# Brutal murders in rural Venezuela highlight violence against women

## Fear, pain and anger felt in Latin American country

**LA MISION, Venezuela:** Denis Reanez was looking through her daughter's things when she found a handwritten song she had been penning on a sheet slipped inside her bible. But Eliannys Martinez would never sing it. She was murdered on February 21 in La Mision in Venezuela's western Portuguesa state, aged just 17 when she became one of the two victims of a sexual predator who sowed terror in the village of 5,000. Murders of women have surged in Venezuela in the past year, and the killings in La Mision have embodied the fear, pain and anger that many in the Latin American country have felt as a result. "They found her dead, in panties, no clothes, face down, her mouth open, it was horrible. It felt like my chest was being torn open," said a tearful Reanez about her daughter.

The last time Reanez saw Martinez, the oldest of her eight children, was the morning of her murder, as they sat side by side in church. Afterwards, Martinez—who played the keyboard-stayed behind with friends to rehearse. She never returned home. Her grandfather Pedro Reanez went out into fields of beans and tomatoes to call out her name over and over again. Acting on advice from police, the family searched the abandoned sheds of a former tobacco factory now covered with vegetation.

Martinez was known to use a shortcut along a sandy path that passed by the dilapidated buildings and where many people would stop under the shade of mango trees to catch a telephone signal.

That was where she was killed. When her grandfather found the body, he covered it with his shirt to protect the crime scene before police arrived. "The shoes were placed" next to her, and she had broken "purple nails," he remembers. The very next day, a few blocks away, 20-year-old Eduarlis Falcon was found dead. She disappeared the day before, after heading to the gym



**LA MISION, Venezuela:** Mileidys Torrealba (left), 39, and Eduard Jose Falcon, 45, pose with portraits of their 20-year-old daughter Eduarlis Falcon, who was murdered alongside another girl, at their house in La Mision, Portuguesa state, Venezuela.— AFP

some three kilometers (two miles) from her home. "She didn't deserve this," said her mother Mileidys Torrealba, 39, whose voice was weak from crying. In her phone, she has some photos of her daughter's last birthday celebration. Paper flowers arranged in the shape of the number 20 adorn a piece of furniture next to Falcon's bed, from the celebrations last September. The killer was arrested on February 27, after he was turned in by his wife, and faces the maximum 30-year sentence.

### 50% increase in femicides

The brutality of the two killings on successive days in such a small village gained national attention and sparked protests against violence against women in Portuguesa and the capital Caracas. In the first two months of this year, 51 women were murdered in Venezuela, according to the national assembly, which on March 2 agreed to discuss reforming a women's rights law. In the last week of February alone there were five

killings, including a 33-year-old in Portuguesa killed by her ex-partner. A teenager in the capital Caracas was also murdered by her boyfriend. In both cases, the man had killed after the woman tried to end the relationship. Last year, during the coronavirus pandemic, 256 women were murdered—an increase of more than 50 percent on the previous year. Some NGOs believe the rise in murders is linked to the pandemic confinement that has forced vulnerable women to spend more time at home with their abusers. Most victims were between 16 and 40 years of age, according to an association monitoring femicide. It amounts to 8.5 women killed per million inhabitants in 2020. In Mexico, one of the country's worst affected by violence against women, that figure is 7.4, according to official figures.

### 'We have to break the fear'

Sexually-motivated femicide remains "unusual within the expression of violence that Venezuelan women" experience, anthropologist Aimee Zambrano, said. Most are "intimate femicides that happen at the hands of partners, ex-partners or family members," said Zambrano, who works with the femicide monitor group and fears that many such murders go unreported. Attorney General Tarek William Saab says his department has processed 600 murders of women since 2017, half of which were solved. Back in La Mision, the streets have been deserted at night.

Francisco Saavedra, a karate instructor, and friends have organized self-defense classes for women on a sports court. Around 30 women and children have been put through their paces learning to punch, kick and elbow strike. "We have to break the fear because fear paralyzes us," said Yasberly Almeida, 35, after taking part in a class. "It's very worrying going out into the streets and not knowing if we'll return home." — AFP

## Floyd's uncle wants justice, but frets about 'the system'

**MINNEAPOLIS:** Deeply wounded and forever changed by the death of his nephew George Floyd, Selwyn Jones is apprehensive about the trial started yesterday of the police officer charged with his murder, his doubts fueled by a legal system that historically has been friendly to law enforcement. "I want justice to prevail," said Jones, a maternal uncle to the Black man whose death under the knee of white Minneapolis officer Derek Chauvin sparked outraged protests around the world. "I obviously want conviction," Jones told AFP. But he said he worries about "the system."

Chauvin, who kept his knee on the neck of the prostrate Floyd for nearly nine minutes on May 25, 2020, faces murder and manslaughter charges in the trial in a Hennepin County district court, where jury selection began yesterday. The 55-year-old Jones, who lives in the small town of Gettysburg, South Dakota, hundreds of miles to the west, said he hopes to attend part of the trial, though social distancing rules imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic mean only one family member can attend at a time. To him, the video of the fateful episode—filmed by a passerby and now seen by millions around the world—left no doubt: Chauvin is "guilty as hell." When Jones first saw the video on television, he didn't know who the Black man was lying facedown under a police officer's knee.

"Damn," he said he thought at the time, "that gonna kill this dude!" When his distraught sister called him with the news, Jones said, it was as if someone had "put their hands through my chest and ripped my heart out." He said he could never forget the images of his nephew begging for his life—and gasping for air as he predicted his own death. As for Chauvin, he said, "he acted like

there was nobody around him," even as a gathering crowd implored him to let Floyd breathe. Jones said it was as if Chauvin told himself, "I can do whatever I want to, because I am a police officer, and I am a white man and we rule the world."

### 'Manipulate the system'

Despite the powerful nature of the video, Jones is not optimistic about the outcome of the trial, which is expected to last several weeks. He said "technicalities"—including laws that give police officers considerable legal immunity—can be used "to manipulate the system to their way." "You've seen things like this happen over time, and they never worked out the way that they were supposed to." The most glaring example, he said, was the 1992 beating by Los Angeles police of a Black man, Rodney King following a high-speed chase. Despite a clear video record of the prolonged beating, a jury acquitted three of the officers involved and reached no verdict on the fourth.

That outcome led to six days of bloody rioting in African-American and Latino neighborhoods that left 63 people dead—a scenario Jones fears could be repeated if Chauvin escapes prison. "If there's an acquittal the whole world is gonna be tore up," he said. "I hate rioting, but sometimes that's the only way that people understand." The circumstances surrounding his nephew's death, and the huge protests it spawned, do give Jones some hope. "Just by chance, my nephew's death had to be in the middle of a pandemic, with everybody in the world (having) that opportunity to see what racism looks like," he said.

"Because that's what it was all about—racism, power and control. The same thing that has been inflicted upon Black people for hundreds of years." "The only reason" Chauvin was arrested, Jones said, "is because people were sick and tired of being sick and tired." New protests are planned around the Government Center where the trial is being held—opening arguments are set for March 29 — and huge media attention is guaranteed. With "so much pressure on this case to do something," Jones said, he does hold at least a bit of hope. — AFP



**MINNEAPOLIS:** Demonstrators hold placards during the "I Can't Breathe - Silent March for Justice" in front of the Hennepin County Government Center.— AFP

## Turkey arrests man for beating ex-wife on street

**ISTANBUL:** A man was arrested in Turkey on Sunday after a video on social media purportedly showing him beating his ex-wife on a street sparked outrage, state media reported.

The suspect was ordered to be detained by a court in the Black Sea province of Samsun on charges of "intentional attempted murder", the official news agency Anadolu said. The video, which went viral on social media, shows the man violently punching and

kicking his 24-year-old ex-wife in front of their five-year-old child as residents called on him to stop.

The assault—which came shortly before International Women's Day—sparked condemnation on social media, with users calling on the authorities not to let him go unpunished. The woman, known only by her initials E.M., was taken to hospital with bruises on her face and head but doctors said she was in good health, the news agency said. In a statement to prosecutors, the suspect named as Ibrahim Zarap said he felt "remorse", according to Anadolu. He claimed his ex-wife had threatened not to allow him further contact with their child. "I was shocked and I didn't know what I was doing," he said.

Domestic violence and femicide remain a serious problem in Turkey. Last year, 300 women were murdered according to the rights group We Will Stop Femicide Platform. Angry over the rising number of women killed by men, women often take to streets in



**BAGHDAD:** A handout picture shows Iraq's President Barham Salih (center) and his wife Sarbagh (left) bidding farewell to Pope Francis (right) during the farewell ceremony at the conclusion of the pontiff's visit to Iraq, at the capital's Baghdad International Airport.— AFP

## Pope Francis departs Iraq after historic trip

**BAGHDAD, Iraq:** Pope Francis concluded yesterday the first-ever papal trip to Iraq, which went off without a hitch despite security worries and a second wave of coronavirus cases in the country. The 84-year-old pontiff covered more than 1,400 kilometers inside the country, bringing encouragement to its diminished Christian community and extending a hand to Shiite Muslims by meeting top cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. "In my time among you, I have heard voices of sorrow and loss, but also voices of hope and consolation," Francis said on Sunday, concluding his last public event. "Now the time draws near for my return to Rome. Yet Iraq will always remain with me, in my heart."

In his packed three full days in Iraq, the Pope made more than a half-dozen speeches in nearly as many cities, repeatedly evoking hope and fraternity. In Baghdad on Friday, he called for an end to violence and extremism and urged officials to do more to fight corruption. Francis called the minority Yazidis "innocent victims of senseless and brutal atrocities," following the Islamic State group's rampage against their esoteric community in 2014. He also met members of Iraq's other minorities in a moving interfaith ceremony at Ur, where the Prophet Abraham is thought to have been born.

On Saturday, he held an extraordinary meeting with the reclusive but highly respected Sistani, who afterwards said Iraq's Christians should have the right to live in "peace." Francis' full day in Iraq's war-battered north on Sunday embodied a cause close to his heart—supporting traumatized Christians. There, he said the "tragic" exodus of Christians "does incalculable harm not just to the individuals and communities concerned, but also to the society they leave behind". — AFP

Istanbul and other cities to demand that the government adheres to a landmark treaty on preventing domestic violence. The so-called Istanbul convention is the world's first binding instrument to prevent and combat violence against women, from marital rape to female genital mutilation. A ruling party official said last year that the convention was "wrong" and speculated over a possible withdrawal. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Sunday he considered violence against women a "crime against humanity". "I condemn once more in the strongest terms any kind of physical or mental violence against women and discrimination," he said in a message for Women's Day yesterday. The opposition CHP party leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu said: "We grieve because of what we see instead of celebrating March 8," in a video message on Twitter where he appeared alongside his wife. "You have my word. We will end the violence," he promised. — AFP



**JERUSALEM:** Leader of the Israeli Labor Party Merav Michaeli, speaks during an interview at the 'Influencers Conference' of the Israeli leading News Channel 12 in Jerusalem ahead of the March 23 general elections.— AFP

## Israeli Labor's new leader: Feminist and battle ready

**TEL AVIV:** Tasked with reviving an Israeli Labor party seen as near death just weeks ago, new leader Merav Michaeli is campaigning for social democracy, feminism and environmental issues. "Labor has lost its credibility and its backbone," Michaeli, 54, said. "It should be the center-left's party of government, to renew the country and get it back on track," she told AFP at her Tel Aviv campaign headquarters ahead of elections set for March 23. But the road ahead will be a rocky one. The party has been in severe decline for a generation and Israeli politics has undergone a significant shift to the right, especially under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in power since 2009.

Israeli Labor won just three seats in the 120-seat Knesset in last year's national elections, down from 44 in 1992 and a far cry from its decades in power. Rather than a return to the party's past glory, Michaeli's immediate goal is to influence the tone and policies of an emerging anti-Netanyahu camp that could cobble together the 61 seats to wrest power from the incumbent. "The most important thing is that the Labor party will have as many seats as possible within that bloc for change, so that no alternative coalition can be built" without it, she said.

The party has already enjoyed something of a bounce since Michaeli trounced opponents in a party primary on January 24, replacing Amir Peretz and becoming only its third woman leader. After the latest election—the country's fourth in just two years—was called in December, polling initially showed Israeli Labor failing to win enough votes to keep a single seat. But since she took the helm, polls indicate the party will double its tally to six.

### 'Need to rebuild'

Michaeli did not rule out any potential political partner, but said there would be ground rules. Her predecessor was widely criticized for joining Netanyahu's most recent ill-fated coalition government. "Rehabilitation of Israeli democracy, return to the rules of the game, return to the voice of reason, that is the only basis" for forming a coalition, she said. "To replace Netanyahu is not enough—we need to also replace 'Netanyahuism.'" The incumbent, Israel's longest serving premier who was also in power between 1996 and 1999, is seen by many as a highly divisive figure.

He has notched up a list of diplomatic and economic successes, lately including normalized ties with four Arab nations, but his coalition governments have quickly foundered in recent years and a corruption trial against him opened in May. Some of Netanyahu's former lieutenants are now seeking to oust him, including defectors from his own Likud party, among them former ministers. Any viable coalition joined by Labor would need to accommodate parties that have similar right-wing agendas to Likud. — AFP