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MEXICO: DNA Tool to Trace Missing Kids

By Emilio Godoy

MEXICO CITY, Nov 12 (IPS) - Andrea C. was eight years old when two unidentified women took her from her home in a neighbourhood on the north side of the Mexican capital, in September 2005. Four years later, she is still missing.

An international genetic identification project, in which Mexico is participating, could help find her. But first, a legal framework to enable data collection, tracing of victims and criminal prosecution of people trafficking is needed in this country.

The Programme for Kids Identification with DNA Systems (DNA-PROKIDS), organised in 2004 by the Forensic Medicine Department at the University of Granada, Spain, aims to fight human trafficking by means of genetic identification of victims and their families, especially children.

"We want to contribute highly valuable information about the origins, routes and methods of trafficking to police forces and intelligence agencies," José Lorente, head of the genetic identification laboratory, associate professor in the Forensic Medicine Department and one of those in charge of the project, told IPS.

DNA carries genetic information that is unique to every human being and is inherited from parents. DNA comparison can identify related genetic patterns in parents and their children.

The DNA-PROKIDS project aims at "promoting automatic and systematic international cooperation, by creating a global database of genetic information" in order to reunite missing children with their families, using DNA comparison, and fight illegal adoptions and human trafficking, especially of women and children.

Another of its goals is to analyse and suggest common legislative frameworks to help solve the problem.

The project is being carried out in collaboration with the University of North Texas Centre for Human Identification, among other supporters and sponsors.

The genetic identification laboratory at the University of Granada has drawn international recognition for helping identify the remains of victims of the 1936-1939 Spanish civil war, including those of renowned poet Federico García Lorca (1898-1936).

DNA-PROKIDS has so far helped to identify 212 children, many of whom have been returned to their families. Specific figures by country are not available, as many of the cases are still under investigation.

Between 100,000 and 500,000 children have disappeared in Mexico over the past five years, according to estimates by non-governmental organisations. The absence of a national database with information on kidnapped or missing children makes it difficult to gauge the magnitude of the phenomenon.

"This year the situation has got worse, and more children have been stolen," Elena Solís, head of the non-governmental Mexican Association for Stolen and Disappeared Children, which works to publicise cases and recover missing children, told IPS.

The Mexico City government, in the hands of the leftwing Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) uses identity documents to keep a register of babies born in its jurisdiction. To date, the city authorities have issued close to one million such documents bearing fingerprints and a photograph.

But in this country of over 107 million people, approximately one million children under 18 do not even have a birth certificate, which means that legally, they do not exist. That makes them especially vulnerable to crimes like trafficking of persons or illegal adoption.

"It's a good thing that progress is being made in this kind of techniques (DNA typing), to identify and protect children from harm, but a legal framework is needed for such identification," Saúl Arellano, head of research at the non-governmental Centre for Studies and Research on Social Development and Assistance (CEIDAS), which focuses on human trafficking and other issues, told IPS.

Although there are no reliable figures, an estimated 20,000 to 50,000 people a year apparently fall prey to trafficking rings in Mexico, and worldwide the number of victims has been estimated at four million.

Human trafficking is the practice of subjecting people to exploitative labour, sexual exploitation or other forms of slavery, through trickery or coercion, within their own country or abroad. In Mexico, this criminal industry recruits people for domestic service, prostitution, seasonal agricultural work or extraction of organs.

Mexico's criminal code does not specifically define stealing children as a crime, which makes fighting it difficult. However, kidnapping is a legally defined crime.

The University of Granada and the Mexican Attorney General's Office signed an agreement in 2006 to develop the DNA-PROKIDS programme.

"Mexico is a particularly important partner, because it is such a large country, with so many people in transit to the United States, and because it committed itself to the programme from the start," Lorente said.

In cooperation with DNA-PROKIDS, the Mexican authorities plan to set up two identity registers. The first, which is controversial because of confidentiality issues, is a DNA database for children and women found away from their homes and families, in conditions of economic, labour or sexual exploitation, adopted illegally or living on the streets.

The second is a DNA database with the genetic profiles of parents or relatives of missing children thought to have fallen prey to trafficking or related crimes.

"The aim is to compare the information in the two DNA databases and find positive matches, so that children can be reunited with their families. If no matches are found, at least the children will be accurately identified in the database, and they won't become trafficking victims just because no one knows who they are," Lorente said.

Non-governmental organisations have proposed setting up an early warning system that can be activated as soon as a missing child is reported.

The idea is inspired by the AMBER Alert (for America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response) system in the United States, which is a voluntary association of police, media and means of transport that broadcasts urgent bulletins calling on the public for help to find children immediately after they are reported missing.

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The name also commemorates Amber Hagerman, a nine-year-old girl who was kidnapped and brutally murdered in the city of Arlington, Texas.

Because of her case, the U.S. Congress extended the alert system nationwide, to prevent and combat the kidnapping of children.

Under Mexican law, the authorities only begin a search after a person has been missing for 72 hours. "By then, the child could be in Thailand," an example of a country notorious for child prostitution, Arellano complained.

"For years we have been asking for a law against child theft. Let's hope the new Congress will listen to us," said Solís.

DNA-PROKIDS held an international scientific meeting Oct. 26-27 in Granada, where experts in genetic identification from 13 countries and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) agreed on common protocols for collecting and storing biological samples, and on the design and production of software for database management, tailored to this project.

According to Lorente, the current protocol will be used as the basis for an international protocol to apply DNA testing to the fight against traffic in human beings.

"The problem with a DNA system is who handles the data. If the police and the Attorney General's Office are infiltrated by organised crime, it represents a huge risk for them to be in charge, because there is no certainty that they will operate with transparency and respect for privacy," said Arellano, referring to the notorious corruption in Mexico, made more intractable by the influence of drug mafias.

The operational phase of the project in Mexico will begin with systematic analyses of suspicious cases. In April 2010, a second international meeting will be held by DNA-PROKIDS to assess the progress made. (END/2009)

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