

Bidding Goodbye to a Guatemalan Symbol

Slain Student Had Put a Face on Nation's Many Kidnapping Victims

By Michael Riley
Associated Press

GUATEMALA CITY, Nov. 6—Thousands of people have been kidnapped in Guatemala in recent years. But this week tears flowed for an abducted university student who came to symbolize the pain of the entire nation.

Black and red ribbons hung for miles along the capital's main boulevard Wednesday as a black hearse carried the coffin of 22-year-old Beverly Sandoval Richardson to her grave. Flatbed trucks followed the convoy with wreaths of red, white and pink roses.

"Beverly is for Guatemala a symbol of kidnapping and its impunity," said her tearful uncle, Enrique Luna, before her brown wooden coffin was lowered into a grave amid a grove of pine trees.

Flanked by 200 mourners, Sandoval's mother and other family members filed past, each dropping a single rose on the coffin.

Sandoval was returning from a day trip to Antigua, a colonial town 30 miles west of this capital, on May 30, 1996, when four men in a car forced her car off the road, seized her and drove off.

Sandoval's case stood out among the numerous abductions because her family went to great lengths to secure her safe return. Many relatives refuse to disclose kidnappings to police and the news media for fear that they too will fall victim.

But Sandoval's family pleaded on television and in newspapers for her

return. For months, cars flew ribbons on behalf of the young woman. Roman Catholics held Masses, and others prayed for her safe release.

On Monday, her body was found in an unmarked grave in Amatitlan, a town about 30 miles south of Guatemala City. Three of her fingers had been severed, newspapers reported.

More than 20 people had been arrested in the case last week. Officials have not said what led them to the body.

While the young woman's plight was particularly gripping, it was by no means rare. As a 36-year civil war has wound down, kidnapping has become a major source of revenue for common criminals who have taken up arms even as leftist rebels have laid theirs down.

Guatemala, with a population of about 11 million, has one of the highest kidnapping rates in the Western Hemisphere. From January through October of this year, 1,218 kidnappings were reported to Neighborhood Guardians, a victims' defense group, according to director Oscar Recinos. That puts the country behind only Colombia and Mexico in the region.

The crime wave has reshaped habits of everyday life.

The rich use armed bodyguards, who linger outside discos in the capital and trail behind groups of teenagers in shopping malls.

But as the rich have gotten protection, kidnappers have begun to target middle- and lower-class victims. Ransoms of \$150 to \$200 are now common. Private security companies

say young women are frequent targets, with rape often part of the ordeal.

"It's not even an issue of class anymore," said Karen Fischer, director of the Alliance Against Impunity, another victims' rights organization. Nine members of Fischer's family have been abducted, including an 8-year-old niece taken off a school bus.

"They're taking poor people, people from the middle class, whoever they can," she said.

The government adamantly disputes the figures provided by Neighborhood Guardians.

"In one case, a young woman might go to a different [part of Guatemala] because she was pregnant, another might take off with her boyfriend," said Salvador Gandara Gaitan, who is in charge of the country's public security. "There are a thousand situations like this and a lot fewer kidnappings."

But weekly press accounts of executives being abducted from the capital's business district or landowners seized on country roads have reinforced doubts about the government's statements.

Sandoval's kidnapping and her family's public response caused anger toward the kidnappers and the government to mount across the country. Many Guatemalans accuse President Alvaro Arzu of failing to make kidnapping—and crime in general—a top priority.