Hearts on Fire for the 43

written by Kent Paterson | September 28, 2020

[September 27, 2020] On the sixth anniversary of the forced disappearance of the 43 Ayoztinapa college students, a flurry of developments is spurring optimism among long traumatized relatives of the students and their dedicated core of supporters.

Nonetheless, frustration and outrage boil among relatives as well as the latest generation of Ayotzinapa students and other student teachers from colleges across Mexico, who waged militant demonstrations last week in Iguala, Guerrero, where the students were forcibly disappeared by Mexican security forces the evening of September 26-27, 2014, and in the Guerrero state capital Chilpancingo. Both actions ended in the partial destruction of state government buildings and property.

The students demanded punishment for officials linked to the mysterious disappearance of videos presumably recorded at Iguala's court building which could show the students carted off the evening of their disappearance.

"The lack of truth is part of the social inequality gap that we suffer in Mexico," wrote in La Jornada Abel Barrera Hernandez of Guerrero's Tlachinollan Human Rights Center of the Mountain, a leading advocate for and ally of Ayotzinapa parents and relatives who've waged a relentless struggle for years that's kept the 43 students on the national agenda.

"Those of us who work in the countryside are not only burdened by centuries of abandonment but also strongman governments, military repression, persecutions, tortures and forced disappearances….Our heart is on fire waiting for the shining moment of truth."

Barrera's sentiments were very much on display September 26 and 27, when thousands of Mexicans marched in the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, Mexico City, Morelos, Guerrero, Michoacan and Chihuahua, according to press reports.

At a September 26 press conference, Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) vowed to get to the bottom of the Ayotzinapa affair.

"I want to reaffirm my commitment to continue with the goal of clarifying what happened, and that the truth-the authentic truth-be known. That is the commitment," said Lopez Obrador. "And as always that we know the whereabouts of the young men and punish the responsible parties."

The President's office says 80 people have been detained so far this year in the Ayotzinapa investigation and 70 arrest warrants issued for individuals, including Tomas Zeron, a former high-ranking federal justice department official who is accused of cover-up and document falsification.

According to officials, efforts are underway to extradite Zeron from Israel. Many of the legal charges pursued by AMLO's government relate to the alleged torture of suspects in the disappearance and the fabrication of a now largely discredited "historic truth" under the previous presidential administration of Enrique Pena Nieto which held that the 43 students were abducted by police and paid killers and all the victims were taken to the Cocula dump, where they were killed and burned in a large fire.

An investigation of the world renowned Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, however, did not find evidence of the type of fire required to incinerate 43 bodies at the Cocula site; no remains of the students were ever discovered at the dump.

The all-died-at-the-dump story was further weakened when Austria's Innsbruck University recently identified remains belonging to missing Ayotzinapa student Cristian Alfonso Rodriguez Telumbre; the young man's remains were previously recovered about a half mile away from the dump.

An alternative line of investigation that the students were divided up and whisked to different places was bolstered by comments made by Mexican Federal Prosecutor Alejandro Gertz Manero to La Jornada newspaper last July that the 43 students, who formed part of a larger group engaged in seizing buses in Iguala for use as transportation to a planned demonstration were confused with members of a rival drug organization, detained by multiple security forces and then summarily executed.

Other developments portending progress in the search for the truth include the establishment of an Ayotzinapa truth and justice commission promoted by parents, a new investigation announced by the head of Mexico's official National Human Rights Commission and formal agreements with a host of international partners. These include the United Nations, Innsbruck University, the Argentine forensic specialists and the Inter-American Commission on Human Right's Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI), an investigative body of foreign experts which was invited in by the former Pena Nieto government but not allowed to continue its work in Mexico after issuing a couple of inconvenient reports that departed from the premises of the "historic truth." Under AMLO'S administration, the GIEI is back in town.

To be sure, serious obstacles crowd the road to the truth, not the least among them the resistance of powerful interests which might be involved in the crime as well as the notoriously bureaucratic and reputedly corrupt judicial system where the Ayotzinapa cases have been fragmented and delayed.

Another glaring example of justice denied surrounds the outright murders of six people in Iguala on the evening of September 26-27, three Ayotzinapa students and three civilians who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Gathering cobwebs in the court system, the murder cases have largely been overshadowed by the mass abduction of the 43 missing students.

Mario Patron, longtime Mexican human rights attorney and former director of the Miguel Agustin Pro Juarez Human Rights Center which has represented Ayotzinapa parents, identifies another huge barrier standing in the way of truth and justice.

"The environment of macro-criminality that was operative in Guerrero at the time of the events has not been clarified," Patron recently wrote in La Jornada. According to Patron, one of the strong points in the previous GIEI reports was zeroing in on the largesse and mechanics of an operation that disappeared dozens of students over an eight hour period and with ample resources drawn from throughout the northern region of Guerrero state.

"That could only happen by means of a criminal structure that connected organized crime with

distinct levels of government," Patron continued. "It's pertinent to reiterate that, when we speak of macro-criminality, we refer to criminality strengthened from the State, in which public institutions work for the interests of organized crime."

Six years after the Night of Iguala, the case of the 43 perhaps stands as the litmus test in determining the nature of the Mexican State. What will prevail? A viable State committed to human rights, justice and democracy or an endlessly corrupted and brutal version of it.