

# Attack and Burn!

June 24, 2009

THEY GRABBED ME, THEY HIT ME, they yanked me by the hair and threw me in the back of a pickup. They sprayed me with tear gas and held a knife to my back. They said they were going to rape me and throw me in the ocean. They said other police were raping my novia (girlfriend) right then. Mexican photojournalist José de Jesús Villaseca had driven with two companions to cover a demonstration outside the Miahuatlán state prison ninety kilometers south of the city of Oaxaca when state police, reinforced by non-uniformed paramilitaries, brutally attacked the relatives and friends of political prisoners being held inside the institution. They yanked Villaseca out of the car in which he was riding, and despite the fact that he displayed a press pass from a Mexico City news service they arrested him and held him in the prison until an Oaxaca non-governmental organization paid his bail. He and the eight others arrested with him still have criminal charges pending against them. So do 141 other Oaxacans arbitrarily arrested on November 25, 2006, during a sweep by over 4,000 militarized police through the city of Oaxaca's centrally located historical district after a protest march. Like Villaseca all 141 were beaten, robbed and humiliated and all 141 were flown to federal prisons outside of Oaxaca without first being charged and tried. During the past year, state and Mexican federal police have jailed over 400 citizens, many on charges that the justice committee of the state legislature has confirmed were fallacious. Death squadrons have assassinated at least 20, and an estimated 100 other Oaxacans have disappeared. The state has filed orders of apprehension for hundreds more, including human rights activists whom they have accused of inciting persons belonging to the Peoples Popular Assembly of Oaxaca (APPO) to commit violent anti-government acts. Political supporters of current Oaxaca governor Ulisés Ruiz beat a retired professor to death when he participated in an attempt to block a roadway near Huautla to prevent Ruiz from making a campaign appearance in 2004. Authorities then jailed the retired professor's closest friend on murder charges despite videos that identified the killers. When Oaxacan teachers declared a strike for higher wages and better school conditions and set up an encampment in the center of the city of Oaxaca two years later, Ruiz dispatched state police to break up the protest. The teachers fought back and forced the police to retreat. Various non-aligned NGOs and indigena groups backed the teachers and formed APPO. Ruiz's government responded by subsidizing death squads that included former and current municipal and state police to attack and intimidate APPO members and human rights workers. To counter these nightly depredations, APPO supporters barricaded streets throughout the city, making transit virtually impossible after dark. Nevertheless, snipers hiding in the Hospital Santa María shot and killed José Jiménez during an APPO-sponsored march in August 2006. The husband of an activist teacher, Jiménez had taken part in a number of anti-Ruiz protests. Despite the fact that hundreds saw Jiménez fall, and despite the fact that autopsies showed that he had been hit by bullets of two different calibers fired from two different directions, Oaxaca's attorney general announced that he'd died during a drunken fight, which he had instigated. TWO MONTHS LATER, armed off-duty municipal police attacked an APPO barricade in Santa Lucía del Camino, a city of Oaxaca suburb, and shot and killed American photographer Brad Will. Journalists photographed Will's killers as they were attacking and published this in both local and national newspapers, but Oaxacan authorities released the assassins and announced that they were going to file murder charges against one of Will's companions at the barricade. That revelation so infuriated Oaxaca journalist Pedro Matias that he told a Rights Action emergency human rights delegation, "The department of justice changed the settings, changed the legal opinions, changed the investigations and after all that what's going to happen here in Oaxaca is that it's going to turn out that Brad Will killed himself. That's the kind of justice we have here." For the past 80 years Oaxaca has been governed by a tight coterie belonging to Mexico's dominant Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI for its initials in Spanish). Though PRI lost the past two presidential

elections the party nevertheless remains strong and controls the majority of governorships within the country. Both Ruiz and his predecessor, José Murat, have been under investigation for fraud and misappropriation of funds. During the November 25 federal police assault, a building housing the financial records of Ruiz and Murat went up in flames and the records were destroyed. State officials accused APPO members of setting the fire by throwing Molotov cocktails into the building, but a tour of the damage indicates that that would have been impossible. The fires were set from inside. The arrests and detainment of APPO leaders, threats against human rights activists, and continuing disappearances of APPO supporters continue. On July 16th assembled state and federal police attacked demonstrators approaching the Guelaguetza auditorium and beat one of them so badly he was in a coma for weeks and no longer can walk, talk, or feed himself. Immediately Ruiz's prosecuting attorney issued arrest warrants for ten APPO leaders, two of whom were outside of the city when the incident happened, for inciting violence. Six weeks passed before five of the police responsible for the brutal beating were arrested. Their defense attorney insists that they merely were doing the jobs assigned to them. "The government has taken the position that no changes should be prompted by popular movements," priest Juan Arias, the spokesman for the state's Catholic presbytery, told me, "and is criminalizing any attempts at change." The state's propaganda station, Radio Ciudadana (Citizens Radio), attacked priests for providing medical aid and sanctuary to APPO members. "They practically said we're criminals for denouncing the violence and repression in Oaxaca," he told the Rights Action. Announcers for the same station urged Oaxaca residents to attack and burn the facilities belonging to the Services for an Alternative Education because members of that group were APPO supporters. Although the federal police force is under the jurisdiction of Mexico's president Felipe Calderón and Government Secretary Francisco Ramirez, neither has made any effort to investigate the violent apprehension and torture of innocent civilians. Various officials from President Calderón's National Action Party (PAN), including Senator Felipe Gonzalez, have applauded the repressive actions, citing the need to show a firm hand against lawbreakers like the APPO protesters. Despite Ruiz's insistence that everything is under control and Oaxaca is a safe place for tourists to visit, teachers who supported the strike are yanked out of their classrooms, arrest warrants are filed against human rights activists, and the squadrons of death roam the streets knowing they can stop, detain, torture, and even kill anyone who disagrees with the status quo. Oaxaca may be safe for tourists but it is not safe for Oaxacans. Especially not for those who protest.

## **Footnotes**