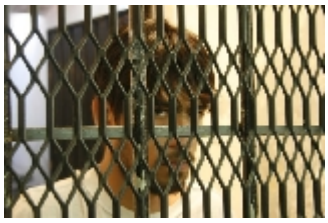
"We Want To Be Heard!"

written by Robert Joe Stout | January 26, 2011



UNIFORMED AGENTS of Mexico's Federal Investigative Agency (AFI for its initials in Spanish) yanked three inmates out of their cells in the minimum-security state prison at Ixcotel, Oaxaca in November, 2008 and transported them to San Bartola Coyotepec, another Oaxaca state prison, for "interrogation." One of the three inmates, Victor Hugo Martínez, told activist friends that the federal investigators beat him and threatened to "make your family pay" if he didn't confess in full to crimes of which he'd been accused two years before and for which he'd been sentenced to prison.

Although they demanded a confession, the federal agents made it clear that Martínez' in-prison activities prompted the beatings and threats, not the crime for which he already had been convicted. Martínez and his two companions, Pedro Castillo and Miguel Ángel García, had formed a political organization, which prison authorities considered a threat to their control of the inmates. Although both the AFI and prison authorities denied that Martínez was held incognito, beaten and tortured, his family's prompt notification of human rights lawyers pressured those involved to return Martínez to Ixcotel, where family members confirmed that body was covered with bruises from the punishment he'd received.

Throughout Mexico the federal government utilizes the investigators and militarized police to subdue dissent. Both agencies participated brutally in breaking up a protest in Atenco, in the Estado de Mexico, in 2006 after local police attempted to arrest a group of street vendors. Atenco was the focal point of resistance against the federal government seizing land to construct a huge international airport on the area's farmlands several years earlier. The government shelved those plans but has retaliated against the residents, whose successful resistance showed the country that united community action could break through the autocratic control the federal government has tried to maintain.

Several months after the Atenco raid over 4,000 armed and armored army units, PFP and local and state police tear-gassed protest marchers and passersby in the city of Oaxaca's central historical district, which the so-called Popular Assembly had occupied for nearly five months. I asked a university professor, a specialist in criminal law, how the government had sustained charges against the more than 140 they'd arrested and sent to federal prisons since most of them were innocent and had nothing to do with the Popular Assembly. He smiled as he tapped my shoulder with his forefinger. "?'All the better that the victims are innocent. It makes the rest of the populace more afraid,'?" he repeated a phrase frequently used by counterinsurgency repressors.

Fear is the reigning force in contemporary Mexico. Fear of escalating criminality, especially in urban areas where assaults, *levantones* (temporarily sequestering a victim and forcing him or her to extract cash from an ATM), robberies, and payment of protection money have become commonplace. Fear of losing employment and falling more deeply in debt as layoffs and business closings increase. Fear of epidemics and natural disasters, many of which have been caused by ecological devastation. Fear for their children, who never seem to be safe or secure, even in *guarderías* (childcare facilities)

or schools. Fear of banks, whose mismanagement and corruption has eaten away retirement funds, fear of inflation and the peso's continuing decline, which has reduced by over 50 percent what a consumer could purchase fifteen years ago. Fear of the police whose corruption and criminality equals that of confirmed gangsters. And fear of the unresponsive federal government that is militarizing the country and refuses to respect—or even acknowledge—human rights.

According to priest Manuel Arias, spokesman for the state of Oaxaca's Catholic presbytery, the government views all popular movements and social protests—even those within minimum security prisons—as threats that have to be countered by force. Armed soldiers surround the Zapatista autonomous villages in Chiapas and logistically support paramilitary groups who burn crops, tear down dwellings, and kidnap people from their homes.

Throughout northern and western Mexico, Army units terrorize towns and villages, robbing money and possessions during their searches for drugs. Armed AFI and PFP units broke up student and teacher demonstrations in Chilpancingo, the capital of the state of Guerrero, and in Morelia, Michoacán, and arrested the leaders and spokespersons involved in the protests. (Mexican law makes no provision for jury trials; a judge determines whether or not the accusations are valid and levies sentences accordingly. Unfortunately for many innocent dissidents, the state governors appoint the judges, and they conform to the governors' dictates.)

Mexican President Felipe Calderón gradually strengthened his hold on the nation after widespread allegations of fraud besmirched his 2006 election. Both Calderón and liberal opposition candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador pulled approximately 37 percent of the popular vote, with the Revolutionary Institution Party (PRI) candidate trailing with approximately 24 percent. The Federal Election Institute, in charge of the balloting, ruled in Calderón's favor and refused to authorize a recount despite discrepancies reported in several hundred polling places. López Obrador's adherents rejected the validity of the election and instituted a massive months-long sit-in in Mexico City, where López Obrador was a popular pro-active mayor from 2000 until 2005.

His popularity and his ability to sustain popular movements and social protest prompted Calderón and his National Action Party (PAN) advisors to seek alliances with the PRI, granting favors — many of them involving huge amounts of money — and government positions in exchange for forming a voting bloc that gave them a majority in the Congress. With similar favors they co-opted a segment of the leadership of López Obrador's Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD), splitting it between López Obrador loyalists and those headed by José Ortega and Amalia García, the PRD governor of the state of Zacatecas. As a result of this split, hundreds of thousands of López Obrador's followers deserted for one or another of three or four smaller parties, a maneuver that assured Calderón's PAN-PRI alliance of a majority in both house of the Congress.

Despite extensive propaganda extolling the democratization of the Mexican political system after PAN's Vicente Fox broke seventy-five years of PRI domination in 2000, the few changes that have been made in the autocratic structure of Mexico's government have been more cosmetic than substantial. In contrast with the rest of Latin America (except for Colombia) Calderón reinforced an ultra-conservative governmental system and fully endorsed neoliberal economic policies, borrowed heavily from the International Monetary Fund and committed the country to what Fox had described as "a government by entrepreneurs and for entrepreneurs."

Privatization of many former functions, including the public retirement system (which lost billions of dollars of invested funds during the economic collapse in 2008), the public health system and the oil industry has exacerbated a plunge into poverty of millions of former job holders and small business owners devastated by layoffs and lost incomes associated with the financial crash. Throughout Mexico, miners, teachers, taxi drivers, airline stewardesses, and even prostitutes

blockade highways, invade government buildings, and march in protest of government policies, but the most organized, outspoken and — according to the federal government, the most threatening — of these movements emerged in the states of Oaxaca and Morelos. The backbones of both of these reform movements were those states' teachers' unions.

Calderón's government refused to comply with recommendations from a variety of international human rights organizations that documented abuses in Oaxaca, at Atenco, and in the northern states where the military unsuccessfully has tried to confront the major drug-exporting corporations. Amnesty International and the International Red Cross took protests personally to Calderón. He smiled for publicity photos taken during meetings with their representatives, but neither he nor any of his high-ranking cabinet officials acted on the denouncements. Similarly no U.S. agencies and few if any U.S. government leaders have voiced concern over the abuses; instead, the U.S. Congress approved multi-million dollar financing of Mexico's military and militarized police under the so-called "Plan Mérida," despite evidence that those organizations were being used to repress popular protests as well as combat drug smuggling.

For years, under the PRI, the drug trade — including importations from Columbia and domestic production — was funneled through high-ranking government officials who pocketed a share of the drug importers profits. In turn the importers agreed not to distribute the drugs in Mexico but to use the country as a pass-through for the cocaine, heroin, and marijuana being smuggled into the United States.

Interpol and Swiss investigators discovered millions of dollars deposited in Swiss bank accounts that they attributed to President Carlos Salinas de Gortari's brother, Raúl. (Carlos Salinas was Mexico's president from 1988-1994.) Mexican federal authorities charged Raúl with illegal enrichment and he was sentenced to prison in 1999 but President Vicente Fox ordered his release in June 2006. Sources throughout Mexico insist that the bank accounts were part of the drug lords' contribution to president Salinas for enabling them to do business.

Coordination between Salinas' party, the PRI, and the drug corporations shredded after PAN's Vicente Fox took office in November 2000. No longer assured of government cooperation, or forced to realign their priorities to accommodate new "protectors," the drug capos began to compete more violently for routes and territories.

Various top drug lord lieutenants broke away from their organizations to negotiate separately with Columbian entrepreneurs. Others shoved their way into immigrant smuggling, prostitution, car theft, and shaking down businesses for protection money. Commando gangs, many led by former drug cartel members (whose memberships often included state and federal police) kidnapped business magnates and/or their children and demanded huge ransoms. Mexican authorities, acting on tips from disgruntled gang members or former gang members, managed to break up a number of these operatives but were unable to save the lives of many of the kidnap victims.

Columnist Sabina Berman of the national weekly magazine *Proceso* compared Mexico's current crime wave with the Al Capone era during Prohibition in the United States:

> "Thanks to it being illegal (during Prohibition in the United States) the price of alcohol zoomed to stratospheric heights and its distribution and sale financed bands of gangsters to commit increasingly more destructive crimes…their economic power permitted them to corrupt local and federal police until those agencies were totally incapacitated…the real problem was not the alcohol but robbery, extortion and assassinations."

With encouragement from the United States, Calderón enlisted the Mexican military in the so-called "war on drugs" and boasted about its accomplishments in breaking up the drug organizations. Although the Bush and Obama Administrations in the United States supported the move, a majority of Mexican citizens did not. They filed hundreds of complaints against individual soldiers and commanders for robbery, extortion, murder, destruction of private property, and rape. Military officials refused to allow the incriminated soldiers to be tried in civilian courts and the majority of them have gone unpunished.

Despite the military involvement, and the diversion of millions of dollars from social programs to fund its activities, the number of assassinations, beheadings, and commando raids has increased — an average of fifteen slayings a day that no longer make front-page news but are summarized as afterthoughts in media reports.

"Hundreds of new addicts are created daily and kidnapping and assaults have proliferated," syndicated newspaper columnist Francisco Rodriguez wrote in 2009. Despite these statistics, and hundreds of accusations filed against the police and the military, Calderón and his government continued to propagandize the successes his administration was recording in the "war against crime." His failure to respond to citizens' complaints and criticisms was a major factor in the resounding defeat PAN experienced during the 2009 mid-term federal elections for the Senate and House of Deputies. Political analysts described the turnover as a ringing repudiation of Calderón's policies and the administration's failure to deal honestly with corruption, crime, and the country's economic collapse.

"When we are fed up with the abuses and errors of the party in power, we vote for the other party so they can abuse us," Mexican cartoonist Pacote depicted a voter explaining the country's reinstalling the PRI's legislative majority. In some states, like Oaxaca, whose PRI governor Ulisés Ruiz has consistently thumbed his nose at human rights indictments and whose prosecutors have left uninvestigated the assassinations of over twenty Popular Assembly protesters, *indigena* rights advocates and candidates opposed to his administration, the situation may even have worsened.

But for a vast majority of Mexicans it is of little consequence who abuses them, the reigning fact is that they are being abused economically, morally and often physically. Not only that, they face abusive and discriminatory treatment when they migrate to the United States. Increasingly hostile U.S. enforcement policies against unauthorized immigration have driven thousands of young jobseekers into the hands of drug exporting organizations who offer them much better wages and benefits than they would receive in either the United States or their home communities in Mexico.

"In Oaxaca it's a crime to write! It's a crime to protest! It's a crime to think!" newspaper correspondent Pedro Matias told members of a Rights Action human rights delegation in December, 2006. His frustration, and the fears that it engenders, reverberates throughout Mexico. "We want to be heard!" Leaders of the Trique subculture in Oaxaca organize marches and close highways complaining, "The government won't listen to us!" The wives of miners buried by a cave-in at Pasta de Conchos in northern Mexico block access to the site of the tragedy shouting, "The government wants to forget what happened! Pretend we don't exist!" The parents of nearly a hundred victims of a privatized government infant care facility in Chihuahua pound on bureaucracy doors demanding, "Why are you trying to ignore us?"

The victims of military aggressions, including destruction of property, theft, and rape, flail desperately at whoever will listen because the federal administration denies that the offenses occurred. Courts refuse to examine testimony from community members protesting the arrests and assassinations of those who tried to stop illegal clear cutting of their forests. "We want to be heard!" — human rights advocates whose documented reports of violations are shelved, journalists who

coworkers have been beaten or killed, *indigena* communities whose homes are raided and burned by government-equipped paramilitaries, churchmen who see drug dealers openly recruit adherents in their communities, writers who report the private enrichment of high-ranking government officials and have defamations charges filed against them and against thousands of others throughout Mexico who shout, write, and demonstrate to no avail.

Meanwhile the government of the United States sends millions of dollars worth of military hardware to Mexico, drives migrants who want to work into the hands of the drug exporting organizations it is trying to contain, and ignores the dangers that the country with which it shares a 2,000-mile border faces as it becomes explosively desperate in its desires for change.

Footnotes