

Mexico: Crisis of Human Rights Becomes International Issue as Violence Continues

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Militant protests by teachers, students, and others, some of them violent, continue in Guerrero on Mexico's southern Pacific coast where the state government seems to have completely lost control. Since six students were killed, 25 wounded and 43 kidnapped in Iguala, Guerrero on September 26, 2014—with the 43 still remaining still not credibly accounted for—there have been nearly continuous protests. Teacher protests over other issues have also taken place in Mexico City and in other parts of the country and have been militant, but not violent.

Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto argues that while most of the country is safe, only three specific areas have problems with violence: Guerrero, Michoacán, and Tamaulipas where there has been a recent spate of drug killings. But the disappearance of the Ayotzinapa students has led to protests throughout the country and abroad, has become a national political crisis, and this month also an international human rights concern at the United Nations and the European Union Parliament leading to much criticism of the Mexican government by international organizations and in the press.

Guerrero Out of Control

The continuing protests have been driven by two causes: first, the demand by their families, fellow students, and the public for the return alive of the 43 kidnapped students and second, the State Coordinating Committee of Education Workers of Guerrero (CETEG), a caucus of the Mexican Teachers Union (el SNTE) calling for an end to the government's education reform. The students of the State Teachers Colleges and the CETEG teachers have been at the center of the protests that have included violent confrontations with the police. But there are several other actors with other agendas.

In Guerrero, shortly after the 43 Ayotzinapa State Teachers College students were forcibly disappeared last September, protestors burned down the town hall in Iguala and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) headquarters in Chilpancingo. More recently protestors have seized public buildings, such as the state Secretary of Finance offices, taken over highways and toll booths, and violently attacked a military base. (Many believe the Mexican Army was aware of and possibly involved in the killings and kidnappings of the students.) When three teachers were arrested during

recent protests, other teachers kidnapped two Coca-Cola company employees and eventually exchanged them for the teachers being held by the state police.

While protestors have taken control of the city government in several Guerrero towns, others have been taken over by the Federal Police (PPF). At the same time the drug cartels and other gangsters continue their murders and kidnappings in both small towns and in the resort city of Acapulco where five were recently killed execution style in just one day, February 21. Also operating in Guerrero and in the neighboring state of Michoacán are armed several community self-defense organizations, some of which arose out of indigenous communities and others out of ranchers' organizations, while yet others are alleged to have ties to the drug cartels, and some which have affiliated with state police organization.

New Forced Disappearances: Miners

Meanwhile, as protests over the forced disappearance of the students continue, eleven miners at the Canadian owned Media Luna mine and the mayor of the town of Cocula, Guerrero were kidnapped on February 7. Some sources say that as many as 15 people were kidnapped by an armed group, though there has been no official confirmation. There were suggestions by local townspeople that the kidnapping had been carried out by *La Familia Michoacana*, a drug cartel. Cocula is the town where according to the Mexican authorities the bodies of the 43 kidnapped students were incinerated. Altogether more than 20,000 people have been forcibly disappeared in Mexico since 2006, while another 100,000 plus have been killed.

Guerrero's government has been in disarray since the Iguala killings and kidnappings. The former governor, Ángel Aguirre of the PRD, stepped down a month after the Iguala killings and kidnapping and was replaced by Rogelio Ortega Martínez, also of the PRD, who became interim governor. Now the Mexican government has accused former governor Aguirre of having embezzled US\$19 million, but strangely it has not charged him; the government has, however, arrested his brother, his nephew, his former deputy, and five of the deputy's family members for their alleged involvement in the crime.

Some Mexican politicians and some in the media have argued that the state has become ungovernable and have called upon President Enrique Peña Nieto of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) to have the federal government take over administration of the state. Why hasn't he done so? The reason may be that national elections and several state elections, including that of Guerrero, will be held in June and the president doesn't want to see them interrupted or stopped. Some media commentators suggest that the deeply troubled PRD which governs Guerrero and Peña Nieto and the PRI which control the national government have arrived at an agreement hoping to perpetuate themselves in power, the PRD in Guerrero and the PRI in the federal government, keep out the conservative National Action Party (PAN). Activists in Guerrero and elsewhere, arguing that the entire political system has become corrupt, have called for a boycott of the coming state and mid-term elections.

Andrés Manuel López Obrador, leader of the Movement of National Regeneration Party (MORENA), infuriated many Guerrero activists and others when he declared that anyone who called for abstention in the elections was either "naïve or linked to the existing regime." López Obrador fears that the left-of-center MORENA party, only recently recognized by the government and participating in its first elections this coming June, could be politically damaged by an abstention movement. But he has now antagonized the student activists, teachers, and others involved in the human rights movement in Guerrero and other states, and that could cost him in the end.

United Nations and European Union Critical of Mexico

The crisis in Guerrero and in Mexico generally also became an international issue in February as appearances before international bodies undermined the Mexican government's reputation. In two separate instances, a United Nations hearing and a meeting with parliamentarians of the European Union, representatives of other governments expressed incredulity and astonishment as they asked hard and questions of Mexican government regarding its handling of the killings and disappearances of the Ayotzinapa students. The Mexican government for more than two months has asserted that the local mayor and his wife ordered police to detain the students and that the police then turned them over to a gang called *Guerreros Unidos* (United Warriors) which killed them and incinerated their bodies and declared the case closed.

The European parliamentarians appeared to be shocked that the government had so rapidly investigated and closed such a complex case. They expressed their horror and indignation that Mexico could have more than 120,000 cases of deaths or disappeared persons because of a regime of impunity. The EU parliamentarians called upon the Mexican government to carry on an exhaustive investigation, to support the parents, and to establish relations with the Mexican people. Similarly the United Nations Committee on Enforced Disappearances, dealing with the Ayotzinapa and other earlier kidnappings, noted the "context of generalized disappearances" and expressed its "concern" over the government's lack of exact information about the missing. The rapporteur expressed shock at mass graves found in the state.

The hearings at the U.N. and the E.U. lifted Mexico's human rights issues out of their usual North American context, where the United States government is dominant and firmly supports the Mexican government, and placed them on the world stage. President Enrique Peña Nieto's government, still with a firm grip on the government bureaucracy, the Federal Police, and the Mexican Army, and has the support of the Mexican media, and most Mexicans states do continue to function without disruptive social protest. Still the recent hearings do weaken the Mexican president, his party, and his administration. What exactly the impact will be cannot be foretold.