

Protests Sweep Mexico over Police Attack on Students



[October 24, 2014] Public outrage over the police murders of six people and forced disappearances of 43 students from the Atoyztzinapa rural teachers' college in the southern Mexican state of Guerrero continued to snowball this week.

Parts of the Mexican Republic were virtually paralyzed by a 48-hour protest convened October 22-23 by student, labor, farmer, and social organizations. Significantly, actions ranging from the shut-down of university campuses and the takeover of government offices to the blockade of highways and international border crossings extended from the traditionally "politicized" zones of Mexico City and southern Mexico to many nooks and crannies of the country.

The Mexican press reported actions in at least 18 of the nation's 32 states, including usually less politically active entities like Colima and Nuevo Leon.

On the evening of October 22, and for the third time this month, hundreds of people temporarily blockaded the Bridge of the Americas between Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, and El Paso, Texas.

In a march that wound from Borunda Park to the border crossing, protesters shouted out the names of the 43 disappeared students and plastered pictures of the missing young men at the local headquarters of the federal attorney general's office.

“To seek a better education is not a crime” and “There are not enough bullets to kill us all” were among the messages spotted on signs. Young people formed the vanguard of the protest, with participating students from the Autonomous University of Ciudad Juarez, Autonomous University of Chihuahua, Technological Institute of Ciudad Juarez and the Ricardo Flores Magon Rural Teachers College of Saucillo, Chihuahua, a sister institution of the Raul Isidro Burgos Rural Teachers College in Ayotzinapa. The women students from the Saucillo school have been at the forefront of advancing the cause of the Guerrero students in Ciudad Juarez and other parts of Chihuahua state.

Among numerous actions, an estimated 15,000 people demonstrated in Guadalajara, Jalisco, while 40,000 students joined in shutting down institutions of higher learning in the neighboring state of Zacatecas. For the first time in its 180-year history, students shuttered the University of Guanajuato Law School in protest. Meanwhile, in the southern border state of Chiapas, indigenous Zapatista communities lit candles for the Ayotzinapa students.

In Mexico City, tens of thousands of students from public and private universities made up huge sections of a march through the capital city. “No violence, no violence,” chanted students from the University of Chapingo.

“We’re witnessing the largest march of recent years, perhaps since the university movement of 1968,” wrote political analyst and Proceso columnist Jenaro Villamil. “It’s one without party affiliation, without electoral slogans and with a great indignation that is visible on faces, on banners, on placards, in spray paintings, and with slogans that channel the anger in the direction of (President) Enrique Pena Nieto.”

Interviewed prior to the march, an activist involved in the massive student strike for institutional democracy and accountability, public education and professional integrity

still underway at Mexico City's National Polytechnic Institute (IPN), voiced the heart-felt burst of solidarity with the Ayotzinapa students that is sweeping Mexican university campuses.

"The rural teachers' colleges and the IPN are sisters. What is happening to the (Ayotzinapa students) hits us in the guts; it's family from the other side. We are linked. We were born as institutions for small farmers and workers. We share the same father, (President) Lazaro Cardenas," said a female student identified as Magali. "One cannot think of these as isolated events. There are connections between the student teachers and the struggle of the Polytechnic..."

In Guerrero the movement got a jump-start on the rest of the country as teachers, students and the citizenry in general began occupying nearly two dozen city halls in different regions of the state early in the week. In Tixtla, thousands of people supported by armed members of the indigenous-led community police effectively took over the small city located near Ayotzinapa. By week's end, protesters led by the Guerrero State Coordinator of Education Workers and Popular Guerrero Movement occupied Acapulco's city hall for an "indefinite" time.

On October 22, between 10,000 and 20,000 people demonstrated in Iguala, the scene of the September 26 crime, garnering enthusiastic support from the residents. A small group of young people broke away from the crowd and set Iguala's city hall ablaze.

Across Guerrero protesters demanded the safe return of the Ayotzinapa 43, punishment for the authors of killings and disappearances, medical attention for victims wounded in the September 26-27 attacks, and the ouster and trial of Guerrero Governor Angel Aguirre, whom protesters hold responsible for the violent circumstances prevailing in their state, now considered as the most violent place in the country.

As the week drew to a close, the protesters got part of their wish: Governor Aguirre announced he was requesting a leave of absence from office, in a move just short of outright resignation.

“In this tragic scenario, I reject that the public debate should center on whether I remain as the governor in charge,” Aguirre said late Thursday, October 23. “The priority should be on continuing with the search for the missing young people.”

Internationally, members of Mexico’s vast diaspora and supporters staged demonstrations for justice in London, Paris, Helsinki, Copenhagen, Madrid, Barcelona, Florence, Bogota, La Paz, Los Angeles, and other cities in at least 15 countries. On October 24, activists in Santa Cruz, California, plan a vigil for Ayotzinapa.

But nearly a month after last month’s violence, it is still not confirmed if the dozens of charred corpses subsequently discovered in multiple, so-called “narco-graves” on the outskirts of Iguala belong to the missing Ayotzinapa students.

Pushed by Federal Attorney General Jesus Murillo Karam and other government officials, several versions exist (disputed in part by Atoytzinapa attorney Vidulfo Rosales Sierra) of why the students, who were in Iguala collecting monetary donations from the public in order to be able to attend the annual commemoration of October 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre in Mexico City, were so viciously targeted by municipal police and Guerreros Unidos cartel gunmen in the first place.

Implicated as the authors of the violence, now-fugitive Iguala Mayor Jose Luis Abarca and his wife, Maria de los Angeles Pineda Villa, who has been identified as the sister of founding members of Guerreros Unidos, were reportedly incensed at the Ayotzinapa students’ presence in Iguala while a ceremony and dance attended by the couple was in progress on

September 26.

Consequently, either Abarca or his wife- or both- ordered that a harsh lesson be given to the young people.

A related explanation for the mass abduction that climaxed the police shootings of the students and passing members of the public is that corrupt city officials and Guerreros Unidos made a monstrous misjudgment in confusing the students with "Los Rojos," a rival organized crime group.

So far, more than 50 people have been detained in connection with the violence, including Iguala policemen and alleged Guerreros Unidos members, according to Attorney General Murillo. In comments about this week's political upheaval, President Pena Nieto reiterated his government's commitment to locating the missing students and applying justice.

"The President of the Republic makes the sentiment of indignation his own...," Pena Nieto said.

While the Iguala atrocities are far from unique in Mexico, the September 26-27 violence has perhaps no better exposed in one fell swoop the collusion of government and organized crime, the criminal infiltration and corruption of political parties, the cold hand of official repression, and the incapability or disinterest of the state in guaranteeing the security of its civilians.

A central message of protesters this week: Iguala was a crime against humanity committed by the state. Analysts and commentators of all stripes weighed in on the turmoil.

"Preceded by the scandal around the (June 30) firing squad execution of 22 people by the army in the Mexico state village of Tlatlaya, the case of the disappearance of the 43 Ayotzinapa students turned on its head the government of Enrique Pena Nieto, which was acting triumphant because of its structural reforms- especially the energy one- and that were

displayed abroad as a modern and vanguard government,” wrote Proceso’s Jose Gil Olmos.

“Nonetheless, Pena Nieto’s government is completely overwhelmed by a social, political and economic crisis...”

Columnist Jorge Ramos, the star broadcaster of the Spanish-language television network Univision that is beamed into millions of U.S. households, was no less poignant in a column this past week.

“The dead of Mexico can no longer be hidden. The massacres of Tlatlaya and Iguala show the worst of the country: the army massacring civilians and the police murdering students. This is Barbarous Mexico. And the government of President Enrique Pena Nieto is almost deaf, paralyzed and overwhelmed, as if the fault was not its own,” Ramos wrote.

“Mexico smells rotten; it smells of the old PRI (President Pena Nieto’s Institutional Revolutionary Party). Students the country over, with marches and protests, no longer swallow the old (government) tale that we will search and punish. The lines are drawn: the government, its army and police are not with the students, with the victims of violence, or their families. Mexico was broken in Iguala...”

Ironically, the outcomes of the massacre in Iguala, the very place where Mexico’s independence from Spain was formalized in 1821, could well lead to a new day for the nation-or its demise. As one Ciudad Juarez activist remarked to FNS, the great challenge of the youth and popular uprising of October 2014 will be to maintain the grassroots momentum while organizing and articulating the movement in a way so genuine, lasting changes result.

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