Shock, Horror, Anger at Killing of 5, Disappearance of 43 in Mexico; Protests, Marches, Strikes, Gov't Buildings Burned

written by Dan La Botz | October 22, 2014

Throughout Mexico there is continued shock, horror, indignation, and anger at the police killing of 5 and wounding of 17 other students, and above all at the disappearance of 43 students on the night of September 26 and the early morning of September 27. For almost a month now protests peaceful and violent involving tens of thousands have rippled across Mexico, as students, teachers, and other citizens demand that the missing students be returned alive, though some evidence suggests they may already be dead. While tens of thousands of Mexicans have died in the drug wars since 2006—as many as 60,000, and perhaps another 20,000 have gone missing—there is particular horror and revulsion at the murder and disappearance of these young people from humble backgrounds, children of peasants, who were students at the Ayotzinapa rural teachers college.

The controversy over the disappearance of the students has taken place just as the Mexican government's National Human Rights Commission issued a report on October 21 stating that Mexican soldiers had executed at least 12 and probably 15 people of the 22 people who were killed in June in the town of Tlatlaya in the State of Mexico. Two of those killed were minors; several had been tortured. Raul Plascencia, president of the Commission called it, "one of the worst incidents of human rights abuses ever committed." So far no military officer or soldier has been indicted for the murders.

The Guerrero students' killings and disappearances have become a full-blown political crisis for the Mexican government, but above all for Guerrero Governor Ángel Heladio Aguirre Rivero of the left-of-center Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). While President Enrique Peña Nieto and opposition leaders such as Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas have called the return of the missing students the country's most important issue, to many it seems as if there is no response. Guerrero Governor Aguirre Rivero remains in office, no police officers or others have been indicted, and the identities of dozens of bodies found in mass graves in the area have yet to be identified. Government agencies and police have produced conflicting and confusing reports that give the impression that they are intentionally misleading and covering up evidence. There is widespread cynicism about the failure of the government and the political parties, the lack of transparency at all levels, the complicity of the authorities with organized crime, and the impunity of the police.

On October 22, Mexico's Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam told the media that Iguala's mayor José Luis Abarca Velázquez and his wife María de los Ángeles Pineda Villa, the head of the municipal police had ordered the attack on the students. But the full story behind the attacks and the role of all of those involved has yet to be clarified.

The Police Shooting of the Students

The events began in the month of September when students had engaged in political protests, claiming that students of urban campuses were being preferred over rural graduates. According to Carlos Pérez, a student eye-witness who survived the massacre, on September 26 a group of students had gone to the city of Iguala to raise money for the studies and when they were done had seized three buses to take them back to the school. Student commandeering of buses had been going

on for some time in Iguala and the students had an understanding with the bus companies that drivers would not be harmed and buses would not be damaged. As they were driving out of the city, they passed the spot where María de los Ángeles Pineda Villa, the wife of the mayor of Iguala and president of the agency for the Integral Development of the Family was giving her report.

To their surprise, the police gave chase and then succeeded in blocking and stopping the buses. When the students stepped off the bus, asking to be allowed to leave, the police "response was to open fire against us immediately," said Pérez. Some of the wounded shouted at the police that they were from Ayotzinapa, hoping that by identifying themselves as students the police would stop. Ambulances began to arrive to take away the wounded, as students began to use their cell phones to call for support from other organizations or friends. But then a group of men dressed as civilians arrived and began to fire at the students, causing more casualties. One of the wounded was union leader Alfredo Ramírez García. the Sole Union of Workers of the Bachelors College.

Earlier Complaints Against the Mayor

Guerrero, one of Mexico's poorest states, has a long history of conflict and violence involving criminal gangs, the police, and radical insurgent groups. As in many regions of rural Mexico, political power is often in the hands of local leaders who reach a modus vivendi with the political and economic power-that-be and with drug dealers and even guerrilla groups. The mayor of Iguala, José Luis Abarca Velázquez, who appears to be the figure at the center of the killings, is just such a person.

Abarca had a reputation for repression long before the recent events. Arturo Hernández Cordona had, a founder and leader of the Emiliano Zapata Peasant Union (UCEZ) and member of the PRD, had appealed to authorities for protection from Abarca who he believed plan to kill him and other leaders of the union. On May 30, Hernández Cordona and his comrades Féxli Rafael Bandera Román, Ángel Román Ramírez, Héctor Arroyo Delgado, Efráin Amantes Luna, Gregoria Dante Cervantes, Nicolás Mendoza Villa and Jimmy Castrejon were kidnapped and three of their bodies were found executed in the town of Tepecoacuilco. The others managed to escape. Mendoza Villa who was an eyewitness to their murder said that it was mayor Abarca who had personally fired a pistol into the face of Hernández Cordona. Autopsy revealed that the man had been tortured. More than twenty others had also faced violence from the mayor according to reports to the National Network of Civilian Organizations of Human Rights for All.

The recent shooting is not the first attack on students in a commandeered public bus. On November 15, 2012, a gang of armed men attacked a bus carrying three students, the bus driver and his wife. The students were returning from Atoyac where they had taken a group to participate in a protest march regarding the students who had been assassinated on the Highway of the Son in December 2011. When they reached Tierra Colorada, a black Ram SUV with darkened windows opened fire, forcing the driver to stop. The men threatened to burn the students alive for commandeering the buses of the Estrella Blanca Company, though after threatening them they were let go.

Looking for the Missing Students

To return to the recent events, following the September 26-27 shootings in Iguala, the students went looking for their friends in jails and hospitals, finding some being treated for their wounds, but unable to locate 43 of their colleagues. The police and civilians began a search and on October 4 found human remains in a common grave containing an undetermined number of cadavers. By October 9 four other graves containing human remains had been found, and by October 16 the number of such clandestine graves sites had risen to 17. The Mexican Attorney General, Jesús Murillo Kram, announced on October 15 that experts from his office had determined that none of the

28 bodies found in the first 5 of 14 graves being examined were the Ayotzinapa students.

Murillo Kram also announced that 46 people had been arrested in conjunction with the investigation of the shooting and disappearance of the students: 22 police officers from Iguala, 14 police officers from the town of Cocula, and ten civilians who were gangsters, members of the Guerreros Unidos gang. Warrants for the arrest of Mayor José Luis Abarca and police chife Felipe Flores Velázquez had also been issued. There was also an investigation into María de los Ángeles Pineda Villa, the wife of Abarca for her alleged role in the disappearance of the students.

While Murillo Kram had ruled out the possibility that the common graves that had been discovered contained the remains of the students, Raúl Plascencia Villa Nueva, president of the Mexican government's National Commission of Human Rights, suggested on October 22 that indeed the secret graves might contain the students' remains. The exhumation and examination of the human remains found in the many mass graves in the area continues under the direction of local police.

Alejandro Solalinde, a Catholic priest and human rights activists, told the media on October 18 that sources in the community had told him that government agents had been responsible for the students' kidnapping and that several of them who were wounded had been burned alive. They were taken off in police vans, not carried away by criminals. He also said that the Ayotzinapa students were a "stone in the shoe" of the government because they refused to accept the neoliberal model of education that it was promoting.

The Political Controversy

The Mexican government and particularly the governor of Guerrero, Aguirre Rivero, have been excoriated by human rights groups, by the church, and by international organizations as calls for the removal of the governor have been ignored. The Senators of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the party of President Peña Nieto, and of the conservative National Action Party (PAN), have argued that Aguirre Rivero should be removed from office and some have suggested that the State of Guerrero should be put in trusteeship of the federal government. The leaders of the left-of-center Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) voted to reject the call for the removal of the government and both the PRD and the PRI denied that the state was "ungovernable," the legal requirement for a trusteeship. The continued presence of Aguirre Rivero in the governor's palace, however, clearly represents a threat to the PRD's continued claim on representing Mexico's working people and the poor. The Catholic Bishops of Guerrero called upon the government authorities to make a great effort to clean up the state's institutions.

The Organization of American States (OAS) has demanded that the Mexican government clarify these events which in the words of President José Miguel Insulza "sadden all America" (meaning all of the nations of North and South America). Legislators from 33 Latin American countries have called upon the Mexican government to end the impunity and punish those responsible for the events in Iguala. A group of academics and intellectuals from 60 countries and 500 universities and research centers from around the world have called for the immediate resignation of Governor Aguirre Rivero and his Attorney General Iñaki Blanco Cabrera and all the police and military who were involved in the crime.

Waves of Protest

Students and teachers have understandably led the protests against the events in Iguala. The State Coordinating Committee of the Education Workers (Ceteg) in Guerrero, other teachers, students, and family members burned the Government Palace in Chilpancingo, the state capital, the headquarters of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) also in Chilpancingo, and the Iguala

town hall. Marches, principally by students, occurred in 25 states. Students called for 48-hour strikes at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and at the Autonomous Metropolitan University (UAM), both in Mexico City. The two universities together have hundreds of thousands of students and many thousands participated in the protests. There have also been strikes in 40 other universities throughout the country.

In Guerrero, the National Coordinating Committee of the Mexican Teachers Union (la CNTE), the students of 17 rural teachers colleges throughout the country, and the Peasant Organization of the Southern Sierra (OCSS), among other groups, plan to seize the 81 city governments throughout the state as well as highway tool gates until the 43 students are presented alive. Ceteg and peasant organizations have already seized several town halls.

This article was updated on October 23.

*This article could not have been written without the daily reporting of *La Jornada on* which I have relied.