

The U.S. and Mexico: Hand-in-Hand in Human Rights Violations

December 28, 2014



Though little-noticed by the U.S. media, events north of the border bore striking similarities to developments in Mexico in 2014. Like in the mass protests that arose south of the Rio Bravo and then rapidly extended worldwide over the police killings and forced disappearances of the Ayotzinapa rural teachers' college students in Guerrero, Mexico, the catalyzing issue in El Norte was police violence.

In the two NAFTA nations, questions of race and class, police militarization, political corruption, justice system breakdown, economic inequities, and systematic human rights violations provided the contextual kindling for national conflagrations.

In a recent press commentary on the links between Ayotzinapa and the police killings of unarmed African American teen Mike Brown and others in the U.S., Aïda Hernández, professor and researcher with the Center for Higher Studies and Research in Social Anthropology in Mexico City, contended that both instances expose the outrage that "poor young indigenous people and African Americans are disposable in racist and racialized societies."

In the case of Ayotzinapa, Hernández wrote, the fact that the majority of the 43 students disappeared last September were of indigenous heritage was a "little discussed" issue even while racist messages pertaining to the students were posted in social media and conveyed in the mass media.

On a similar note, a pre-Christmas piece by Reuters lent more credence to charges of widespread racial profiling by the New York City and other police departments.

Interviewed for the story, 25 current and former African American New York cops reported their own personal run-ins with white officers, including harassment, gun-waving threats, arbitrary stops and searches and even excessive use of force.

"There's no real outlet to report the abuse," former New York Police Department captain and Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams, was quoted by Reuters.

In the U.S., the August shooting death of Mike Brown by white officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson,

Missouri, thrust police violence, racial profiling and militarization onto the center of the national political stage.

Yet, the dress rehearsal for the showdown was staged months earlier after homeless camper James Boyd was shot to death firing squad style by two members of the Albuquerque Police Department.

The shooting sparked the most intense demonstrations in the Duke City since the early 1970s, with protesters successively occupying Central Avenue, briefly blockading Interstate 25, installing a "peoples' assembly" at an abruptly canceled city council meeting and conducting a peaceful sit-in at Mayor Richard Berry's office.

But in an exaggeration of both the tone and physical impact of the demonstrations, the actions were sometimes mischaracterized as "violent protests" in the commercial media, especially by Associated Press stories that were picked up by other media outlets like KUNM-FM.

In contrast, displays of militarized police power that stunned the U.S. during last summer's Ferguson uprising, were front and center in New Mexico the previous March. After Albuquerque, an uprising against police brutality shook Salinas, California, where four Latino men were shot and killed by local cops earlier this year.

When the police killers of Mike Brown in Ferguson and Eric Garner in New York were later exonerated, protests erupted in nearly 200 U.S. cities and continued well into the traditionally apolitical holiday season, just they did in Mexico against the attacks on the Ayotzinapa students.

In the U.S., an unprecedented blockade by thousands of people of the emblematic Mall of America in Minnesota occurred only days prior to Christmas.

The December slayings of two New York City police officers by a man with a criminal history and no known connection to the protests, purportedly in revenge for the Brown and Garner killings, prompted provocative statements by the New York City police union leadership vowing "wartime policing" and holding that Mayor Bill de Blasio had "blood on his hands."

If the vows are carried out, they will only confirm what critics have been saying all along: U.S. policing is an "us versus them" enterprise in a one-sided contest of militarized cops against the public, especially people of color.

Meanwhile, scenes of law enforcement on a war-time footing are readily evident in the Mexican landscape, where legions of armed security forces roam the streets with high-powered weapons and military-use vehicles. Often decked out in combat fatigues, they are soldiers, marines, state police, municipal police, bank guards and private security personnel of all brands.

Both the U.S. and Mexico are embroiled in seemingly endless wars- against terrorism, drugs, immigrants, drunk drivers, etc. On the U.S. side, the estimated military-related costs incurred since the 9-11 attacks range from the Congressional Research Service's low ball figure of \$1.6 trillion to the staggering \$4.4 trillion (or more) calculated by Boston University Professor Neta Crawford and others, according to a story on the CommonDreams website.

Washington's enormous expenditures, increasingly funneled into the hands of private contractors, were made during years when millions went without jobs; social services were cut; aid to the states was slashed; a whole generation of college students was entrapped in deep debt; and an emblematic U.S. city, Detroit, was allowed to sink into ruin. And still, the wars go on and on...

Some are making the connections between police violence, military spending, the drug war, human

rights violations, and foreign policy. By November, signs proclaiming "Aytozinapa-Ferguson" began appearing at U.S. protests against police brutality. In early December demonstrations against U.S. security aid to Mexico, targeting the \$2.1 billion anti-drug Merida Initiative (also known as Plan Mexico) that provides law enforcement training and equipment to the Mexican government, were held in more than 50 U.S. cities. Young Mexican immigrants were among the principal conveners of the action.

"This is a community effort by Mexican residents of the U.S. who don't want our tax money to finance the Mexican government, which is corrupt," said Karla de Anda, one of the protest organizers.

"We are tired of the support that the U.S. government gives to the security forces in Mexico, which have tortured, disappeared and killed thousands of people," activist Roberto Lovato told CNN en Espanol.

After six years of Merida, Washington and Mexico City can lay claim to successes in capturing and eliminating leaders of organized crime like Chapo Guzmán, but it would be folly for the two governments to credit their joint security program for fundamentally disrupting the overall drug and organized crime business or ending high levels of violence, both of which grind along in the cycle of business as usual.

The post-2008 Merida Initiative, it must be remembered, was implemented-in fits and starts that included a partial suspension of payments precisely over human rights issues in Mexico- during the years when violence soared to new heights south of the border and left more than 100,000 murdered, at least 23,000-plus disappeared and more than 250,000 persons forcibly displaced from their homes and communities, according to conservative estimates.

In 2015 the Merida initiative is likely to be the focus of renewed scrutiny, thanks to Ayotzinapa and other atrocities like the June 30 slayings of 22 people by the Mexican army in the state of Mexico. More and more, both Washington and Mexico City are frequent occupants of the international human rights hot seat.

Recently, both governments have been taken to task or seriously questioned by the United Nations, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, the European Parliament, the Permanent Peoples Tribunal, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and others.

While the breadth and scope of alleged human rights violations is far too long to expound upon here, the brief list includes torture, police violence, femicide, forced disappearance, and racial profiling.

"Despite the great economic and social differences that separate (Mexico and the U.S.), racism, impunity, state violence and criminalization of social protest unite the realities on both sides of the border," wrote Hernández.

The year 2014 put the NAFTA partners-and the world-on notice that respect for basic principles of life is sacrosanct. It's simply not acceptable to torture people or disappear them into oblivion. It's not okay to shoot civilians in the back. And government fudgings of the truth, cover-ups, policy change simulations, and impunity are less and less tolerated by civil societies that are finally re-asserting themselves after many years of slumber.

Reprinted courtesy of Kent Paterson and Frontera NorteSur: on-line, U.S.-Mexico border news, Center for Latin American and Border Studies, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, New Mexico. For a free electronic subscription: email: fnsnews@nmsu.edu