

8-22-2007

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## Recommended Citation

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<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/5136>

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## **Murder of Activist Underscores Major Problems with Illegal Logging in Mexico**

*by LADB Staff*

*Category/Department: Mexico*

*Published: 2007-08-22*

The murder of an anti-logging activist in mid-May is evidence of the strong resistance authorities are facing in combating the illegal cutting down of forests in Mexico. Aldo Zamora and his brother Misael were ambushed and gunned down in May of this year as they gathered information on illegal logging for Greenpeace Mexico in a forest area in Mexico state. Misael survived the attack. The government estimates that Mexico loses about 26,000 hectares of forests a year to illegal logging (see SourceMex, 2007-03-21). This includes logging in the winter habitat for the protected Monarch butterfly (see SourceMex, 2002-02-20 and 2006-05-31).

Environmental advocates said the data being collected by Zamora was part of Greenpeace's campaign to protect valuable evergreen forests in Mexico state from indiscriminate cutting. "These trees, which are just a few kilometers from Mexico City, have great commercial value," said Gabriel Quadri de la Torre, a former director of the Instituto Nacional de Ecologia (INE). "But their value is even greater as a natural resource."

### ***Two suspects arrested***

More than two months after the murder, authorities arrested two of the four suspects accused of killing Zamora. The two men arrested were members of a gang that had been involved in illegal logging activities in Mexico state. Until the arrests were announced, there was concern that Mexico state authorities would allow the perpetrators to remain free.

Mexico state Gov. Enrique Pena's administration had come under strong criticism for the slow pace in investigating the case. "Even though the perpetrators have been identified, there have been no orders for their arrest," nationally syndicated columnist Miguel Angel Granados Chapa said.

The arrests came only after nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) like Greenpeace Mexico and the Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustin Pro Juarez (PRODH) joined with the Zamora family to pressure the federal government to become involved. The government sent dozens of soldiers and law-enforcement agents to aid in the search that eventually resulted in the arrest of Sylvester and Fernando Jacinto Medina.

Following the detention of the Jacinto Medina brothers, the Pena administration attempted to put a positive spin on the situation. "[This arrest] reiterates our commitment...to fully combat impunity and delinquency in all its forms," said the Procuraduria General de Justicia del Estado de Mexico (PGJEM).

Greenpeace Mexico welcomed the news but urged the government to capture the other suspects and end illegal logging in Mexico. "While the members of these gangs are free, including Aldo's murderers, there will be no justice for the Zamora family or for the forests," said the organization.

Others wondered whether Mexico state authorities would be willing or even able to combat illegal logging. "In Mexico state, illegal logging is prevalent in at least 20 locations," said federal Deputy Rolando Elias Wismayer, a member of the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM). At the federal level,

President Felipe Calderon has launched a campaign to combat illegal logging and has pledged "zero tolerance" against those involved in this kind of activity. The campaign goes hand in hand with the government's reforestation efforts (see SourceMex, 2007-03-21). "More than 55% of the national territory and 80% of the existing forest ecosystems are part of our system of collective property," said Quadri de la Torre. "Because of this, the state is the only party capable of [regulating illegal logging] and protecting the interest of the public in our country's forest ecosystems."

### *Anti-logging efforts 'extremely difficult'*

Greenpeace Mexico and other environmental advocates note that the effort to combat illegal logging remains extremely difficult, since those involved in that activity either bribe or threaten local indigenous communities to surrender the trees on their collective farms. Other anti-logging activists harassed Zamora is the latest anti-logging activist targeted for his work to preserve Mexican forests.

Unlike most other anti-logging activists, Zamora lost his life because of his activities. Others were imprisoned after local authorities accused them of bogus crimes. In 1999, Rodolfo Montiel Flores and Teodoro Cabrera were jailed on fabricated weapons and drug charges, after they defied efforts by a subsidiary of US multinational paper company Boise Cascade to cut down several tracts of forest in the Sierra Madre del Sur in Guerrero state (see SourceMex, 2000-04-12, 2000-09-13 and 2001-11-13).

Another case involving a false arrest of an anti-logging activist was that of Felipe Arreaga, who took on powerful landowners in a campaign to halt logging in the Coyuquilla River Valley in Guerrero state. Arreaga was arrested in 1998 on charges of murdering Abel Bautista, son of powerful landowner Bernardo Bautista Valle, even though he produced evidence that he was nowhere near the site of the murder. A federal judge ordered Arteaga's release in 2005, after he had spent nearly a year in jail (see SourceMex, 2005-10-19).

In 2003, local authorities imprisoned two Raramuri Indian activists, Isidro Baldenegro and Hermenegildo Rivas, for their efforts to block logging in the Coloradas de la Virgen mountain range in Chihuahua. The two men were jailed on trumped-up drug and weapons charges, but were released on orders of a federal judge (see SourceMex, 2004-06-30).

Other anti-logging activists barely escaped death. Albertano Penaloza, one of the founders of the Organizacion de Campesinos Ecologistas de la Sierra de Petatlan y Coyuca de Catalan (OCESPCC), was ambushed in May as he returned home with his four children. He survived the attack, but two of his teenage sons were killed by the gunfire (See SourceMex, 2005-10-19).

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