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The police forces in two Mexican cities have come under attack for practices that have violated or threaten to violate the individual human rights of citizens. Police in the city of Leon in the central state of Guanajuato were severely criticized following the release of two training videos that showed officers practicing torture techniques. A third video released later showed Leon police officers abusing a suspect.

The videos appeared just days after the police in Mexico City also were accused of brutality in a botched raid of a nightclub, which resulted in the death of 12 people. Critics say these incidents reflect poorly not only on local authorities but on President Felipe Calderon's ineffective efforts to improve human rights in Mexico.

Along with the complaints about the police, the semi-independent human rights ombud released a report in mid-July documenting eight new cases of alleged abuse and torture by Mexico's military.

Videos show torture methods by police in Leon

The Leon videos, obtained by local newspapers and broadcast on national television and on newspaper Internet sites, created a major uproar in Mexico because they appeared to confirm the charges from private citizens and human rights advocates that law enforcement was engaged in massive violations of human rights in Mexico.

The two training videos, produced in 2006, depict very graphic scenes. In one case, police appear to be squirting water up a man's nose, a longstanding practice in Mexico in police interrogations. The interrogators then simulate dunking the man's head in a hole said to be full of excrement and rats. The man gasps for air and moans repeatedly. "This is troubling," said prominent human rights activist Sergio Aguayo, who founded the Academia Mexicana de Derechos Humanos (AMDH). "In the past, torture was usually hidden. Now they don't even bother."

In another video, an unidentified English-speaking trainer directs an exhausted victim to roll into his own vomit. Other officers then drag him through the mess. The person who portrays the victim is a member of the Grupo Especial Tactico (GET) of the Leon police force who volunteered to appear in the 160-hour training exercise. In addition to the gruesomeness of the scene, the presence of a foreigner, particularly one from an English-speaking country, is a touchy subject in Mexico. The person directing the action is a British citizen employed by an unidentified US private security company, said online publication CounterPunch.

US company provides training

The revelation that a US company was training police to torture came as President Felipe Calderon's administration has been enlisting the help of the US government to provide funding for law-
enforcement activities related to the war against drugs (see SourceMex, 2007-11-28). The bilateral-cooperation plan ran into trouble when the US Congress attempted to impose conditions that would have forced Mexico to protect human rights (see SourceMex, 2008-05-21).

The US Congress eventually toned down its demands (see SourceMex, 2008-06-11), but a provision forbidding Mexico from using testimony derived from tortured witnesses remained in the final bill. "The only thing that I thought when I saw those videos was, 'Thank God the US Congress attached some human rights conditions' [to the Plan Merida funding]," said Jose Miguel Vivanco, Americas director for New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW). The videos surfaced exactly one day after US President George W Bush signed the first year of the US$1.6 billion Plan Merida into law giving Mexican military and police US training, armaments, and resources. This prompted the US Embassy in Mexico City to issue a statement distancing the US government from the videos. "The US government was not involved in this training in any way. We have seen the press reports and are following it closely," an embassy spokesman said on condition of anonymity.

Leon police chief Carlos Tornero insisted that the videos involved only depictions and not real cases of brutality. He defended the practices, saying the training was necessary because police must face "real-life, high-stress situations," such as kidnapping and torture by organized crime groups. "These are no more than training exercises for certain situations, but I want to stress that we are not showing people how to use these methods."

Critics argued that the training made police less sensitive to the public. As evidence, the Televisa network transmitted a video showing an actual case of brutality in Leon. In the video, police officers are shown jumping on the ribs of a suspect curled into a fetal position in the bed of a pickup truck. Tornero acknowledged that the case, which occurred earlier this year or late last year, was under investigation and that the officers involved had disappeared.

**Politicians come under fire**

The case could become a political hot potato for politicians in Guanajuato, which is governed by Calderon's Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). Leon mayor Vicente Guerrero, a PAN member, defended the training in the video and blamed the media for the outcry. He has said the tactics are used not to teach police how to torture but how to protect themselves against members of organized crime who may use such methods against them. "The training will continue. It's that simple," said Guerrero.

The mayor's defense of the training drew protests from citizen groups, which organized a large demonstration in front of the municipal palace on July 5. The protesters, which included academics and university students, urged the government to halt showing the torture-training techniques to the police. "It's very worrisome that there may be training courses that teach people to torture," said Raul Plascencia, an investigator from the Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH).

Guanajuato Gov. Juan Manuel Oliva Ramirez, also a PAN member, was much more cooperative toward the CNDH. Oliva accepted the commission's request that the state attorney general conduct a special investigation into the case and take any actions necessary. Officials said, however, that they were powerless to take any criminal or penal action regarding the training videos because no
crime was committed. So any action by Oliva's office would have to be administrative, including a directive to the Leon police to halt the training. Still, the third video does show actual police abuse, giving Guanajuato officials reason to intervene in that case.

**Mexico City police criticized for impunity**

The controversy regarding police brutality also surfaced in Mexico City this summer. In mid-June, police were sent to investigate underage drinking and drug-related activities at the News Divine nightclub, which was packed mostly with young people celebrating the end of the school year.

The officers in the raid, attempting to keep patrons from leaving the scene, blocked the only exit. This caused a deadly stampede in which nine patrons and three officers were asphyxiated or crushed to death.

The Comision de Derechos Humanos del Distrito Federal (CDHDF), which investigated the incident, said the police not only failed to follow proper safety procedures but also were involved in several violations of individual rights during interrogations.

For example, the commission said, 10 women, eight of whom were minors, were forced to strip for a medical exam, despite their not being accused of any crime and their parents not being notified or asked for consent. "These acts cannot be seen as isolated events," said CDHDF president Emilio Alvarez Icaza. "They constitute systematic and institutionalized practices, which must be eradicated."

The CDHDF report cited other examples of how the police mishandled the situation, including using a single bus to load up the detained youths. "The lack of buses motivated the decision to block the exit with a large group of police," causing the youths to pile up in a narrow hallway where many died, the commission's report said.

Furthermore, the CDHDF accused city police and prosecutors of trying to obstruct its investigation into the raid. The case represents a black eye for the administration of Mayor Marcelo Ebrard, a member of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD).

In the aftermath of the case, Ebrard announced steps to overhaul the police force, including the departure of police chief Joel Ortega, a strong ally of the mayor who has held the post since 2004. Ortega had replaced Ebrard, who was dismissed because of his role in another police scandal involving an attempted lynching of undercover federal officers in 2004 (see SourceMex, 2004-12-01).

As a result of the case, authorities have brought criminal charges against 39 police officers and local officials as well as the club owner. Guillermo Zayas, the police chief at the precinct the officers were dispatched from, faces 12 counts of homicide.

In a television interview, Zayas said he was being made a scapegoat. New allegations surface against military Several accusations of human rights abuses have also recently been brought against the Mexican Army.
In a report released July 11, the CNDH said it has documented eight new cases of alleged abuse and torture by soldiers involved in the government's effort to combat drug trafficking. The commission has documented 634 cases of military abuse since Calderon launched the anti-drug campaign at the start of 2007 (see SourceMex, 2007-01-24).

The new cases documented by the CNDH include allegations that soldiers stationed near the US-Mexico border tortured a migrant whom they mistook for a drug runner by shoving splinters of wood under his toenails and fingernails.

The Mexican Army is also accused of using electric shocks on the testicles of two men and on the stomach of a third man while troops searched homes in Michoacan state between June and October 2007. The CNDH said officers of all ranks, including lieutenants, captains, and one major, were involved in the abuses. The Secretaria de Defensa Nacional (SEDENA) has promised to conduct a thorough investigation of the eight new cases reported by the CNDH. A SEDENA statement noted that two Army officials and 10 soldiers are already on trial in connection with three of those cases.

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