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Mexican Congress, International Organizations Condemn Killing Of Two Human Rights Activists In Guerrero State

by LADB Staff

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The explosion of drug-related violence and the Mexican government's military response appear to have pushed respect for human rights to the back burner in Mexico. Troops dispatched to try to wrest control of states where the drug trade has escalated are also accused of violations against the very civilians they are sent to protect. Beyond direct violations in drug-conflict areas, President Felipe Calderon's government is also facing questions about its passivity in combating human rights violations that occur under the radar.

The latest example is the murder of two Mixtec Indian activists, who were killed for denouncing human rights violations by members of the military against residents of Ayutla in Guerrero state. Raul Lucas Lucia and Manuel Ponce Rosas, leaders in the Organizacion para el Futuro del Pueblo Mixteco (OPFM), disappeared on Feb. 13, after being abducted by three armed men who identified themselves as police officers. Lucas and Ponce, who were taken near the community of Ayutla, were found dead a week later in shallow graves near the municipality of Teconapa.

The initial investigation showed that the two men were tortured and executed. Activists had denounced activities of Army, local police The two activists had made enemies among federal and local authorities because they led the OPFM's complaints against the Mexican Army for harassing and violating the rights of local citizens, who are primarily Mixtec and Tlapaneco Indians. The military had been patrolling the area for some time, allegedly in search of members of the rebel group Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo Insurgente (ERPI). As OFPM president, Lucas filed several complaints against the military with the Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH), a government-funded semi-independent agency.

Four complaints presented in 2008 offered details of how soldiers and local police officers had conducted illegal interrogations, damaged property, and stole goods from residents of at least 20 communities in the municipality of Ayutla. The stolen goods included newly harvested sugarcane. In many instances, soldiers and local police accused residents of belonging to the EPRI or the Ejercito Popular Revolucionario (EPR). "[Lucas] told how soldiers would bribe children in the towns of Fatima and Vista Hermosa with candy and then ask them if they had seen guerrillas or drug traffickers," columnist Luis Hernandez Navarro wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada. Raymundo Diaz, coordinator in Guerrero for the Colectivo contra la Tortura y la Impunidad, said there is no evidence yet to determine exactly who carried out the executions. "At this point, we cannot accuse any particular individual of the assassinations of Lucas and Ponce, but we have concluded that this was a crime of the state," Diaz told Inter Press Service. "The homicides of Raul Lucas Lucia y Manuel Ponce Rios are another step in the war of intimidation against the indigenous communities in La Montana and Costa Chica regions," said Hernandez Navarro. "Two noble and brave defenders of the rights of indigenous peoples were savagely eliminated." Hernandez said he had no doubt about the military's involvement in the incident. "In this region,

military personnel have sown hate, violence, and death, have stolen crops, and have committed other abuses," said the columnist. "No one should be surprised if there is an irate backlash."

Other analysts pointed out that Lucas had been previously targeted by the military. "Lucas was tortured by the Army on several occasions," said John Ackerman in a column written for the weekly news magazine *Proceso* and the *Agencia de noticias Proceso*. "Just two years ago, he suffered a bullet wound in the neck following an ambush." Angry feud with local mayor also reported While the military may be a prime suspect in the case, local accounts also mentioned a running feud between Lucas and Ayutla Mayor Armando Garcia Rendon. On the day of the kidnapping, 60 Ayutla communities represented by Lucas and Ponce had planned a large-scale demonstration to demand that the Garcia administration provide them with more agricultural inputs. Furthermore, the Acapulco-based newspaper *La Jornada Guerrero* reported that Garcia and Lucas had a very heated argument two weeks before the abduction. Witnesses said Garcia a member of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI)*, which has long held control over many small communities in Guerrero state threatened Lucas while also offering him a couple of concessions if he and his wife, local city councilor Guadalupe Castro Morales, would "come over to his side."

The argument between Garcia and Lucas was related to allegations that the mayor had bribed the newspaper *El Sol de la Costa* to write a negative article about Castro Morales. Among other things, the article implied that Castro was a "puppet" of Lucas. "The mayor paid off the newspaper to speak badly about the councilor," *La Jornada Guerrero* quoted a witness as saying. "We all know this because the editor [of *El Sol de la Costa*] is an employee of the city and has even been given a secretary." Lucas allegedly told Garcia, "If you keep speaking poorly of the councilors, you're going to have to deal with me." Garcia responded: "Raul, for your own good, align yourself with me and invite your wife to do so, too. I can offer you a house and money."

The murders of Lucas and Ponce brought wide condemnation from Mexican and international human rights organizations and prompted both chambers of Congress to demand that the Calderon administration conduct a thorough investigation and present a report to Congress by the middle of March. The Chamber of Deputies asked that three government entities, the *Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR)*, the *Secretaria de Seguridad Publica (SSP)*, and the *Secretaria de Defensa Nacional (SEDENA)*, issue a detailed report on whether there were any detentions in the municipality of Ayutla on Feb. 13.

The Senate went one step further, demanding that the president set into motion commitments by the Mexican government via the UN to prevent forced disappearances. Federal legislators also requested that the administration of Guerrero Gov. Zeferino Torreblanca Galindo, a member of the center-left *Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD)*, conduct its own independent, exhaustive, and impartial investigation. The Torreblanca administration responded by naming a special prosecutor to conduct the probe. The *CNDH* has also launched its own inquiry into the case, sending a team of investigators to Ayutla to gather testimony from residents to determine if any violations of individual rights were committed.

CNDH president Jose Luis Soberanes has promised that the commission will use all means at its disposal to address the case. International agencies among those demanding answers The

outrage about the murders of Lucas and Ponce extends beyond Mexico's borders, with a myriad of organizations condemning the case. Prominent among these are the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) of the Organization of American States (OAS), the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Amnesty International (AI), Human Rights Watch (HRW), Ireland's Front Line, the presidency of the European Union (EU), the Latin America Working Group (LAWG), and the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA). All the agencies called on the Calderon administration to investigate the case fully, punish those responsible, and enforce human rights protections to prevent such incidents in the future. "We wish to express our concern about the conditions of vulnerability under which the defenders of human rights conduct their work...particularly in the regions of Guerrero known as Costa Chica, Costa Grande, and Montana," the OHCHR said in a statement. Similar comments came from the IACHR, which said: "The work of defenders is essential for the construction of a solid and enduring democratic society. They play a leading role in the process of ensuring respect for the rule of law and the strengthening of democracy."

Calderon government reiterates commitment to human rights The Calderon government did not immediately respond directly to the Lucas and Ponce case. But officials at a forum on human rights sponsored by the Chamber of Deputies took great pains to point out that Mexico is fully committed to protecting its citizens and promoting transparency, fighting corruption, and upholding the legal system. Daniel Cabeza de Vaca, deputy interior secretary for legal matters and human rights, told participants at the conference *Políticas Públicas para los Derechos Humanos* (public policies for human rights) that Mexico is open to scrutiny and willing to collaborate with other countries to uphold principles of protection. "We have made advances because the government is fully committed to dialogue and collaborative work not only with institutions but also with the legislative and judicial branches," said Cabeza de Vaca.

Any advances the government has made in human rights are being eclipsed by the extensive use of the military in the fight against drug traffickers. There have been numerous complaints against soldiers for violating the rights of civilians who are not even linked to the drug trade (SourceMex, January 24, 2007 and July 16, 2008). The US government, which is supplying some of the funding used in Calderon's war against drugs through Plan Merida (SourceMex, November 18, 2007 and June 11, 2008), also noted the complaints against the military. In an annual report issued in February, the US State Department said the war on drugs had a high cost for Mexican society because of the violations of human rights.

The report also raised concerns about the high incidence of impunity and corruption at various levels of government. Other observers said the problem is systemic. "The cruel torture of Raul Lucas and Manuel Ponce Rosas...is evidence of the lack of progress we've made in our country in the areas of justice and human rights," Ackerman said. "The governments of change, both at the federal and state level, have not sought to transform the system of justice," said the columnist in reference to the PAN administrations that replaced the PRI at the federal level and PRD administration that replaced the PRI in Guerrero.

The PRI has been most associated with impunity and human rights violations. Ackerman also faulted the judicial branch, which he accused of "refusing to open itself to public scrutiny" and

choosing to stay out of controversial cases involving human rights violations, including the crackdown in Atenco in Mexico state (August 22, 2007). He also mentioned the decision of the high court (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nacion, SCJN) to exonerate Puebla Gov. Mario Marin in the case involving the forced detention of a journalist (SourceMex, December 05, 2007).

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