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## Recent Tamaulipas Massacre among Difficult Challenges for New Attorney General Marisela Morales

by Carlos Navarro

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The world was horrified by the discovery of the bodies of more than 70 immigrants, mostly from Central and South America, last summer at a ranch near the town of San Fernando in Tamaulipas state ([SourceMex, Sept. 8, 2010](#)). That horror was repeated when authorities announced that more than a dozen new mass graves, containing at least 126 bodies, were discovered at the same location in March of this year. Authorities found the new mass graves after interrogating members of the Zetas drug cartel who were suspected of hijacking a bus along the route frequented by migrants heading to the US. The investigation and subsequent prosecution is the first test for new Attorney General Marisa Morales Ibáñez, who was confirmed quickly by the Senate on April 7 to replace Arturo Chávez, who resigned ([SourceMex, April 6](#)).

### *Authorities unearth dozens of bodies from mass graves*

The hijacked bus operated by the carrier Omnibus de México had originated in Guanajuato state and was reportedly carrying would-be migrants to the US-Mexico border. The bus took a great risk by traveling through territory controlled by the Zetas, who have been known to set up clandestine checkpoints on the route as part of their kidnapping operations.

Kidnapping has proved to be a lucrative business for the Zetas, since would-be migrants often have relatives in the US. In addition to extorting their relatives, the Zetas often force migrants to work for the cartel. Some are used to carry drugs across the border. Migrants who refuse to participate have been killed and placed in mass graves.

The kidnapping prompted authorities to launch an intensive investigation. As a result, the Mexican Army detained more than a dozen individuals, who confessed to the killings and led investigators to the mass graves. As of April 13, the graves yielded 126 bodies of men and women murdered by kidnapers, but the number of victims could increase. The total far surpassed the 70 bodies extracted from the same ranch near the community of San Fernando last summer.

Not all the kidnapped victims were murdered by the Zetas. "As part of the operations, the Army freed five kidnap victims," said Alejandro Poiré, a spokesperson for the Consejo de Seguridad Nacional (CSN).

The bus hijacking has prompted transportation companies to take extraordinary measures. Transpaís, one of the largest bus companies with operations in Tamaulipas, said all of the company's units would be monitored around the clock via satellite. "We join civil society in condemning these killings, and we join the call to the state and federal governments to forge ahead in their efforts to free our highways from insecurity," the bus company said in a statement.

Officials in Tamaulipas state cautioned that the investigation is ongoing, although they verified that a number of the victims were confirmed to be Mexican citizens. "We have to be very cautious, especially because we do not want to cause alarm among the general population," said Morelos

Jaime Canseco Gómez, Tamaulipas government secretary. "What we can tell you is that the victims are fellow Mexicans."

What is not known yet is how many victims were of Central and South American origin, although authorities in Guatemala confirmed that at least one victim was a citizen of that country.

There are no recent figures on the exact number of would-be migrants who have fallen victim to the Zetas and other drug-trafficking organizations. A report published by the Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH) in February of this year indicates that more than 11,300 would-be migrants from Central and South America were kidnapped in Mexico between April and September 2010, most in large groups. "A figure this large indicates that the government has done very little to reduce the number of kidnappings affecting the migrant population," said the CNDH. The report pointed out that, in at least one in every 10 cases, corrupt police officers or immigration officials were involved.

### *Government criticized for faulty drug-interdiction plan*

President Felipe Calderón's nearly five-year anti-drug campaign ([SourceMex, Jan. 24, 2007](#)) has come under fire from human rights organizations. Groups like the CNDH, Amnesty International (AI), and the UN contend that the effort has strengthened rather than weakened the drug cartels and has contributed to an explosion of other human rights violations, including the mass murders in Tamaulipas.

"The mass graves found yesterday once again show the Mexican government's failure to deal with the country's public-security crisis and to reduce criminal violence that has left many populations vulnerable to attacks, abductions, and killings," AI's Mexico expert said on April 6.

AI has conducted a two-year study of the plight of migrants from other countries in Mexico, and the results were contained in the recent CNDH report. "Amnesty International concluded that undocumented migrants run the risk of suffering generalized abuses in our country," said the CNDH. "They are marginalized from society and become 'invisible people' without a voice."

The violence has unsettled society at large, with many citizens urging the administration to call some sort of truce with the drug cartels. Among the advocates of this position is poet Javier Sicilia, who organized a demonstration in Mexico City and 19 other cities in Mexico to protest the administration's anti-drug strategy. In an open letter to Calderón and the major cartels, Sicilia—whose son was murdered in a street massacre on March 28—criticized "a badly planned, badly carried out, and badly led war" and suggested that a cease-fire was in order.

There were also strong criticisms from opposition politicians. Sen. Carlos Navarrete, the floor leader of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) in the upper house, took issue with statements from the Calderón administration that the government is winning the fight against drug traffickers. On the contrary, he said, the killings in Tamaulipas are evidence that the government is overmatched in its efforts to control the cartels.

"[The massacre] is an example of how authorities have been helpless in the face of extreme violence," said Navarrete. "They collect bodies, conduct investigations, find alleged perpetrators, and then close the case."

Sen. Jesús Murillo of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), who chairs the domestic affairs committee (Comisión de Gobernación), also criticized the administration's disjointed efforts. He

said it is not sufficient to condemn the murders, but the government must find ways to address the problem.

"All the participating agencies should be integrated, and there should be a common strategy," said Murillo. "Rather than looking for a scapegoat, we need to come together on a strategy that will truly address this problem in the quickest, most realistic, and most efficient manner."

### *Morales inherits difficult case*

Despite the criticisms, the Calderón government is not likely to back down from its current strategy of targeting the drug-trafficking organizations directly. One reason is the strong pressure from the US government, which is providing funds for drug-interdiction efforts via Plan Mérida ([SourceMex, Oct. 17, 2007](#)).

The Tamaulipas case is one of the first important tests for Attorney General Morales, who won a strong endorsement in the Senate during her ratification vote. Morales, who spent much of her career fighting organized crime and corruption, was ratified by a vote of 84 to 15, with seven abstentions. The PRD and its allies accounted for the nay votes, although PRD Sens. Rosalinda Hernández and Josefina Cota abstained.

The consensus is that Morales has the qualifications and the fortitude to lead the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) during a difficult period. "From the time Arturo Chávez came to the PGR, there was doubt whether he in fact had the qualifications to merit the post," columnist Yuriria Sierra wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper. "Marisela comes to the PGR with solid qualifications."

But Sierra noted that Morales will have to put her full attention on the massacre in Tamaulipas and on the street shooting that killed Sicilia's son.

In one of her first statements to the press following her ratification, Morales promised to vigorously pursue the investigation of the Tamaulipas massacre. "As of today, we confirm the discovery of 116 deaths as a result of these criminal actions, initially attributed to the Zetas," the attorney general told reporters on April 12. Another 10 bodies were recovered the next day.

Morales said the Mexican Army had thus far arrested 17 people suspected in the murders, including Zeta leader Jony Torres Andrade, commonly known as La Sombra (the shadow). Two other suspects arrested in the aftermath of the hijacking of the Omnibus de México bus, Armando César Morales Uscanga and Erik Rubén Zetina Hernández, led authorities to the mass graves.

During April, authorities detained other Zeta members involved in illicit activities, including Víctor Hugo Martínez Morales, who managed finances for sales in Nuevo León state.

As she moves forward with the fight against organized crime, Morales faces the difficult task of restoring the PGR's integrity. "Marisela Morales has pledged to avoid politics while serving as chief prosecutor as well as cleaning up several of the PGR units," said nationally syndicated columnist Rubén Cárdenas "She does not have much time to perform this task before Felipe Calderón concludes his term next year."

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