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Guerrero Gov. Ángel Aguirre Takes Heat for Student Crackdown in December

by Carlos Navarro

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In what many consider an unprecedented development, Guerrero Gov. Ángel Aguirre Rivero agreed to appear before the Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH) to testify about alleged human rights violations in his state. While no other high-level official has ever before testified before the CNDH, the circumstances surrounding Aguirre's appearance have created a political dilemma for the governor from the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD).

The CNDH summoned Aguirre to hear his version of a police crackdown against student demonstrators on Dec. 12. The incident resulted in the deaths of two students, who were part of a protest against the state and federal governments for the lack of resources for the Escuela Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa, an institution dedicated to training teachers. The protestors also were clamoring for better conditions at the school and guaranteed jobs in the future.

The incident has prompted the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) to launch its own investigation.

The protestors made their point by blocking the Autopista del Sol, which connects Mexico City and Acapulco. Authorities tried to dislodge the demonstrators, and in the process killed students Gabriel Echeverría de Jesús and Jorge Alexis Herrera del Pino. A third victim, gasoline-station employee Gonzalo Rivas, died after a heroic effort to turn off pumps at the facility, which prevented a potential disaster from a fire started during the demonstrations. The CNDH has not determined who started the fire, although there have been suggestions that the student protestors might have been the culprits.

Human Rights Commission launches investigation

It was not immediately clear who fired the shots that killed Echeverría and Herrera, and the Aguirre administration would not assign responsibility. This prompted the CNDH to launch an investigation, including a summons to the Guerrero governor to provide testimony. Following the meeting with Aguirre, the CNDH said it would issue a set of recommendations at the conclusion of its investigation, which includes sifting through official documents and taking statements from witnesses.

Aguirre said he would wait until the CNDH and the PGR had completed their investigations to take action but promised he would punish any members of his cabinet or state law-enforcement agencies deemed to have had a major responsibility in the violent crackdown and the deaths of the two students.

An early assessment from the CNDH suggests that members of a police investigative unit fired the shots, but it has not been determined whether the suspected officers were part of a municipal, state, or federal force. CNDH president Raúl Plascencia said there was a "high probability, even a good

deal of certainty," that the bullets came from police. But he noted that police failed to help wounded demonstrators or preserve evidence after the incident.

The issue has become a political hot potato for the PRD, which is not used to being on the receiving end of protests involving repression. If anything, the PRD has supported demonstrators, including the teachers' strike in Oaxaca in the 1990s ([SourceMex, Sept. 13, 2006](#)).

In the aftermath of the incident, more than 5,000 protesters marched in the state capital of Chilpancingo to demand that Aguirre be removed from office. The same demand was presented at a huge demonstration in Mexico City, which included students and political activists from the states of Guerrero, Oaxaca, Chiapas, Michoacán, Aguascalientes, Morelos, Tlaxcala, Hidalgo, and Puebla states.

"Impeachment of the state governor and punishment for those who ordered and carried out the killings," student protester Eduardo Mesa Gómez said.

In response to the incident, Aguirre has dismissed state attorney general Alberto López Rosas, state police chief Ramón Almonte Borja, and deputy police chief Ramón Arreola. The PGR has also announced the arrest of 12 Guerrero state police officers suspected of having played a role in the deaths of the two students.

Aguirre has also reached out to the protestors, but the students have said they are not planning to hold any discussions with the governor until the deaths of their two colleagues are cleared up.

PRD defends governor

PRD officials came to Aguirre's defense. "I don't think the proper action now is to demand the governor's resignation. This is not the solution," said Deputy Armando Ríos Pítter, PRD coordinator in the lower house. "What Guerrero state needs at this moment is a comprehensive investigation to clarify the incident and to punish those responsible for the deaths of the two students and the gas-station employee."

Aguirre's supporters also organized demonstrations to express their solidarity with the governor. On Jan. 6, about 5,000 people marched in Chilpancingo to support Aguirre and to bring the message that the governor should not take the fall for the actions of others. The march included several public officials and state and federal legislators from the PRD. But local writer Mauricio Leyva Castrejón told reporters that the march was planned entirely by a citizen committee and not party officials.

Still, Aguirre also cannot escape his past. The governor, a former member of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), has some connections to the infamous Aguas Blancas massacre in Guerrero in 1995. In that incident, police killed 17 campesino demonstrators and injured dozens of other protestors as they clamored for the government to provide drinking water and more schools, hospitals, and roads.

The repression was conducted by then Gov. Rubén Figueroa, who was forced to resign in the aftermath of the massacre. Aguirre, a close collaborator of Figueroa, was appointed to replace Figueroa on an interim basis. But critics accused Aguirre of blocking a full-scale investigation into the incident.

"History does not necessarily repeat itself, but sometimes it goes around in circles," said

Jorge Fernández Menéndez, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior. Guerrero is one of those states where violence is a constant, even though the names and the circumstances change. What happened at the Autopista del Sol...in a way is a reminder of the incidents at Aguas Blancas in 1995."

The Aguas Blancas incident, and the lack of adequate investigation, led to the creation of the guerrilla group Ejercito Popular Revolucionario (EPR) in Guerrero state ([SourceMex, Sept. 18, 1996](#)).

The incident might have also contributed to the PRI's eventual loss of the gubernatorial seat in Guerrero. The party narrowly retained the governorship in 1999 ([SourceMex, Feb. 10, 1999](#)), but lost the seat to the PRD in 2005 ([SourceMex, Feb. 16, 2005](#)). The PRD retained the seat in 2011, with Aguirre as its candidate ([SourceMex, Feb. 9, 2011](#)).

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