President Enrique Peña Nieto Announces New Anti-Kidnapping Campaign

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by Carlos Navarro
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President Enrique Peña Nieto has unveiled a new strategy to prevent kidnappings and find missing persons that will shift the focus to intelligence gathering. The new plan, announced in late January, seeks to learn from the failed strategies of preceding administrations, primarily those of ex-Presidents Ernesto Zedillo (SourceMex, Sept. 2, 1998), Felipe Calderón (SourceMex, Jan. 7, 2009), and Vicente Fox (SourceMex, June 30, 2004). Tens of thousands of people were abducted during the Zedillo, Calderón, and Fox administrations, but the kidnappings only gained wide attention when they involved a prominent personality such as politician Diego Fernández de Cevallos (SourceMex, May 26, 2010), banker Alfredo Harp Helu, actress Laura Zapata, or writer Ernestina Sodi (SourceMex, June 16, 2004).

Calderón tried to demonstrate that his administration was serious about addressing the problem with the high-profile arrest of French citizen Florence Cassez, who allegedly participated in a kidnapping ring created by her then boyfriend Israel Vallarta Cisneros (SourceMex, April 1, 2009). The case proved more of an embarrassment than an advantage for Calderón, as a panel for Mexico’s high court (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación, SCJN) ruled that the sting operation that led to Cassez’ arrest violated the Frenchwoman’s rights (SourceMex, Jan. 30, 2013).

The Calderón government also came under severe criticism for failing to solve tens of thousands of disappearances, most related to the ex-president’s campaign against drug traffickers. The criticisms were documented in the documentary Retratos de una Búsqueda (Portraits of a Search), released during the second half of 2013 (SourceMex, Jan. 23, 2013).

The Peña Nieto administration does not exactly have a stellar record when it comes to kidnappings. In fact, the number of abductions during the president’s first year in office increased significantly from the last year of the Calderón administration. A recent report from the Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB) indicated there were 1,695 abductions in 2013, an increase of more than 20% compared with 2012. Even so, some nongovernmental organizations such as Alto al Secuestro accuse the Peña Nieto government of underreporting the abduction figures. The total for 2013 is closer to 2,755, said Alto al Secuestro director Isabel Miranda de Wallace.

Peña Nieto, who promised a tough anti-crime strategy shortly after he took office (SourceMex, Dec. 19, 2012), has had mixed results in that effort. The administration has managed to bring down homicides and other violent crimes but has been unable to halt the growth in kidnappings and extortion.

**Strategy centers on prevention, intelligence gathering**

This increase in abductions is what prompted the administration to put together an anti-kidnapping strategy, which places less emphasis on prosecution of the crime and more on intelligence gathering and prevention.
"Coordination and trust among different levels and offices of the government and the use of intelligence over force will be the fundamental basis of the National Anti-Kidnapping Strategy," Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong told reporters at a press conference.

To coordinate the effort, Peña Nieto appointed Renato Sales Heredia, an official from the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR), to head a new agency known as the Coordinación Nacional Antisecuestro. The agency officially started operations with the publication of the anti-crime strategy in the government’s daily (Diario Oficial de la Federación) on Jan. 28. The primary mission of the agency will be to coordinate local, state, and federal efforts using the latest technological advances. SEGOB will provide funding, staffing, equipment, and other resources required by the agency.

As part of the plan, Sales announced the creation of a committee involving civil organizatio to monitor the strategy. In an interview with Noticias MVS, Sales identified 10 states where the campaign will concentrate its efforts: Guerrero, Michoacán, Morelos, Tamaulipas, Tabasco, Oaxaca, Zacatecas, México state, Durango, and Veracruz.

The new anti-kidnapping czar also agreed with Miranda de Wallace’s assertion that the number of kidnappings was probably higher than what the administration recorded in 2013. This, he said, was because of the fear by many victims and their families to report the abductions to authorities.

Anti-crime organizations endorse campaign

Despite her concerns about the lack of accurate data, Miranda de Wallace and other anti-crime advocates endorsed the effort. Wallace said the new anti-kidnapping plan represents an opportunity to "change history and the direction of our country, [and] to show that the spirit of pessimism can be reversed."

The anti-kidnapping initiative also received the endorsement of Alejandro Martí, director of the anti-crime organization México SOS, María Elena Morera of Causa en Común, and Josefina Ricaño of México Unido Contra la Delincuencia.

Martí—who joined Miranda de Wallace, Morera, and Ricaño at a press conference sponsored by the government to unveil the plan—acknowledged that anti-crime efforts in the previous three administrations had failed but said he was optimistic the current plan would yield positive results. "The citizens view this initiative with optimism," said the México SOS leader, who son was kidnapped and murdered.

In an interview with journalist Ricardo Alemán of Grupo Imagen Multimedia, Martí explained his reason for optimism, pointing out that Peña Nieto has a record of keeping his promises. "My reasoning is that we can all see that this government has shown a capacity to bring together the three branches of government and the state governments," said Martí.

Despite the blessing from the leaders of prominent anti-crime organizations like Alto al Secuestro and México SOS, the plan received mixed reactions in the media. Ricardo Alemán, in a column in the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal, said the failures during the last three administrations should be shared by all levels of government not just the three presidents that presided during the 18-year period.

Nevertheless, the columnist faulted federal strategies during the three administrations. "The federal governments of the last 20 years failed because they put a higher priority on combating drug
traffickers but did nothing to address a crime that is just as odious or even more repugnant for thousands of Mexicans: abductions," said Alemán, whose column was also reprinted in his online news site La Otra Opinión. "Kidnappings should be given a higher priority than any policy against violence and crime. We need a change in paradigm."

Other voices were less supportive of the new Peña Nieto plan. "It is shameful that another new program to combat kidnappings has been announced. Many years have transpired, and we are in worse shape than when this crime began to become prevalent in the late 1990s," columnist Leo Zuckermann wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excélsior. "And now the Peña Nieto government is promising that the problem will be resolved. This problem has been resolved many times. What is incredible is that, once we think we have it under control, it comes back with even greater force."

Zuckermann said the reason for a lack of continuity is that the country suffers from political amnesia. "The institutions and the law-enforcement agencies that combated this terrible crime so efficiently no longer exist."

Adrián Trejo García, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper El Financiero, said no accurate records exist on the number of kidnappings that occurred since the Fox administration, when the number of abductions exploded. "We do not know the real statistics on this crime," said Trejo. "It is estimated that for every kidnapping that is reported, at least another three are not reported to any authority."

Trejo acknowledged, however, that Peña Nieto is employing the proper strategy to attempt to address this problem. "In contrast to other strategies, the one that was presented [on Jan. 28] places a greater emphasis on intelligence gathering than on the use of force," said the El Financiero columnist. "In other words, the goal is to prevent rather than to react to a crime that has been committed—which is the strategy that had been employed until now."

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