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Federal Government Reduces Estimates for Number of Disappeared in Mexico

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In June, President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration issued its second revision this year of estimates on the number of people who have disappeared as a result of the extensive drug-interdiction efforts begun during President Felipe Calderón’s administration (SourceMex, Jan. 24, 2007). As recently as last year, the Peña Nieto government was holding to the figure of more than 26,000 disappearances reported at the end of Calderón’s term in 2012.

In late May, Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong reported to Congress that the administration had revised the figure down to 8,000. The interior secretary said the statistics were reduced following a review that indicated that thousands of names on the list were people who were found to be safe in their communities. Other people on the list were simply found to have eloped, abandoned their homes, or migrated to the US, Osorio Chong said.

When Osorio Chong released the first set of greatly pared-down numbers to Congress, he immediately came under criticism from human rights advocates, who demanded that the Peña Nieto government explain how the reduction was accomplished.

Amnesty International (AI), for example, said it was unclear whether the 18,000 people who are no longer considered "missing" had never actually disappeared or were found after official investigations.

The criticisms led Osorio Chong to take a second look at the statistics, most of which were gathered through the Sistema Nacional de Información (SNI), which relies on statistics provided by the 32 states and the Federal District.

The interior secretary then issued a revised figure of 16,000 that did not substantially change the data for the number of people considered missing at the end of the prior administration but did add to the total number of disappearances since Peña Nieto took office at the end of 2012.

"The number continued to increase since 2012, with another 12,000 or 14,000 people whose whereabouts are unknown," the interior secretary said. "When you add those numbers to the 8,000 that we estimated originally, that adds up to about 16,000."

The administration apparently plans to release a third report on disappearances. In mid-July, Sergio Jaime Rochín, president of the agency designated to track disappearances (Comisión Ejecutiva de Atención a Víctimas, CEAV), said that any statistics released by the Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB) to date are preliminary and that a final and more accurate tally would be issued in October.

SEGOB’s release of the first set of revised statistics came just days after hundreds of mothers of disappeared marched in Mexico City in May to pressure the government to determine the fate and whereabouts of the more than 26,000 who at that time were considered "disappeared." The disappearances have been a sore spot for many Mexican citizens, and this was demonstrated in...
a documentary released in 2013 entitled Retratos de una Búsqueda (Portraits of a Search), which features the plight of three mothers attempting to find their sons and daughters (SourceMex, Jan. 23, 2013).

"As of now, we do not know whether the list released by SEGOB has been updated. We do not know the number of victims of disappearances during the current presidential term (which started in December 2012). We are not aware of whether [President Peña Nieto] has expressed an opinion on the disappearances, condemning them, for example," organizers of the demonstration said at that time.

**Human rights commission maintains its estimates**

While the administration has revised its statistics twice, the semi-independent human rights commission (Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, CNDH) has kept its numbers close to those reported at the end of Calderón years. The CNDH has maintained its tally at about 24,000 disappeared for 2005-2014. This is the period between the end of ex-President Vicente Fox’s administration and the first two years of the Peña Nieto government. CNDH president Raúl Plascencia Villanueva, who presented those statistics in testimony to Congress, said the data refers to people "whose whereabouts are unknown." Plascencia Villanueva did not comment on the administration’s revised statistics.

The CNDH president had mixed reports about the role of authorities in relation to disappearances and interaction with civilians. In his testimony to Congress, Plascencia Villanueva said the commission has uncovered evidence in several cases that "agents of the state" were responsible for disappearances, and there are cases where the perpetrator could be either a member of a law-enforcement agency or a criminal organization.

Later, in a report projecting the CNDH’s agenda for 2014-2018, Plascencia Villanueva said the number of complaints against the armed forces fell by 50% between 2012 and 2013, which was the first year of the Peña Nieto government. He said the statistics reflect Peña Nieto’s decision to remove the Army from direct drug-interdiction efforts (SourceMex, Dec. 19, 2012). If the trend continues, the CNDH president predicted, the complaints against the armed forces could decline to about 25% in 2014.

PGR officials said the administration has placed a high priority on finding the individuals who remain missing. Speaking to reporters in early July, deputy attorney general Mariana Benítez Tiburcio said the administration intends to streamline efforts to find the individuals who disappeared, including carrying out greater coordination with state authorities.

A major problem for the administration is determining the identity of bodies found in mass graves to confirm whether the victims match those on the list of the disappeared. In one media report, at least 400 people have been found in such graves in 13 states since the start of Peña Nieto’s term in late 2012.

Many times the bodies discovered in mass graves are those of citizens of Central American countries, as was the case with the dozens of bodies found in Tamaulipas state in 2010 and 2011. The victims were killed by the Zetas drug cartel (SourceMex, Sept. 8, 2010, and April 13, 2011).

In addition, the criminal organizations responsible for the deaths often attempt to erase identifying characteristics of the victims. For example, a special investigation by authorities in Coahuila
determined that at least 300 people had been kidnapped, massacred, and presumably disintegrated with diesel fuel outside the community of Los Cinco Manantiales in 2011.

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