Massacre of Students Exposes High Levels of Corruption in Guerrero State

Carlos Navarro

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex

Recommended Citation
https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/6113
Massacre of Students Exposes High Levels of Corruption in Guerrero State

by Carlos Navarro

Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2014-10-15

The recent disappearance of 43 students from a teachers college (Escuela Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa Raúl Isidro Burgos) in Guerrero state has created a political firestorm in Mexico, exposing the extreme levels of corruption among local officials, police, and criminal organizations. The students were reported missing after violent confrontations with police in the city of Iguala on Sept. 26.

The students, known as normalistas, were preparing for a large demonstration against authorities, who had proposed cutting funding for the Isidro Burgos School. Some eyewitnesses said the Sept. 26 incident occurred when the students attempted to steal busses to transport students to a major demonstration scheduled for Oct. 2.

The eyewitnesses said at least six students and bystanders were killed in the incident, in which the perpetrators shot at demonstrators from moving vehicles. Other demonstrators later disappeared, and authorities were looking into reports that the students were killed and their remains were burned and buried in mass graves.

Initial reports indicated that the police officers fired indiscriminately at the students, burned the corpses, and buried the remains in mass graves. However, subsequent investigations suggested that the killings might have been premeditated and that the students might have been killed on orders from higher-ups. To add to the confusion, Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam later revealed that DNA tests indicated that 28 bodies found in the mass graves did not belong to the students. The whereabouts of the missing students remained unknown as of mid-October, although DNA tests are ongoing on the remains of charred bodies found in four other mass graves in Guerrero. A team of Argentine forensic experts is assisting with the identification of the bodies.

An investigation by the Guerrero attorney general’s office (Procuraduría General de Justicia del Estado de Guerrero, PGJE) indicated that Iguala Mayor José Luis Abarca and the city’s police chief Felipe Flores Velázquez might have ordered the killings. State attorney general Inaky Blanco said Abarca and Flores went into hiding after receiving a subpoena to testify in the case. Abarca had requested a leave of absence shortly after the Sept. 26 incident came to light.

In comments to reporters, Gov. Ángel Aguirre Rivero revealed that a local criminal organization known as Guerreros Unidos had infiltrated police departments in Iguala and other communities. The local Guerreros Unidos leader in Iguala is Salomón Pineda Villa, the mayor’s brother-in-law. Pineda might have been acting on orders from the cartel’s top leader, a man known only by his nickname of El Chucky, said attorney general Blanco.

Black eye for center-left PRD

The incident represents a black eye for the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), as Abarca and Aguirre are both affiliated with the center-left party. Aguirre has come under fire because
his administration recently decided to supervise local police departments, including the one in Iguala. "In the multiple homicides and the disappearance of the students of Ayotzinapa, the local police force is not the only responsible party," said the daily newspaper Excélsior. "Investigations also implicated the Secretaría de Seguridad Pública de Guerrero. The Iguala municipal police had operated since May under the single-command concept, even though state public safety secretary Jesús Martínez had said that the program would begin in October."

"Gov. Ángel Aguirre Rivero was aware of the gravity of the situation in Iguala and the connections between municipal authorities and organized crime. Why did he allow Mayor José Luis Abarca and police chief Felipe Flores Velázquez to escape?" asked the authors of the Templo Mayor column in the daily newspaper Reforma.

The concerns are so strong for the PRD that newly elected party president Carlos Navarrete convened a meeting of federal and state officials in Iguala to address the situation. The agenda included a vote on expelling fugitive mayor Abarca from the party. "What would this accomplish?" the authors of the Excélsior column Frentes Políticos asked. "They would be better off making a public acknowledgment to the families of the disappeared students that it was the party that covered for Abarca and in fact proposed his candidacy for mayor. They ignored his joint activities with the criminal organization Guerreros Unidos."

There are also some minor repercussions for the Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena), as the party’s gubernatorial candidate Lázaro Mazón was the one who openly promoted Abarca’s candidacy as Iguala mayor while both were members of the PRD.

Mexico unable to dispel reputation as violent country
The situation has also scathed President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration, adding fuel to the perception overseas that Mexico remains an insecure country and that the federal government is unwilling or unable to control criminal activity. Peña Nieto has attempted to address the violence by forming an elite police force that will be deployed to specific areas of conflict. However, security analysts are skeptical the new 5,000-member force will make much of a difference (SourceMex, Aug. 27, 2014).

"The president’s closest advisors explained that the Iguala situation unleashed an especially unfavorable reaction in the international press about security and the levels of violence in Mexico," the author of the column Lenguas Valperinas wrote in the online news site Silla Rota. "The Guerrero situation destroyed [the perception of security] that the president managed to construct in 22 months of government, reinforcing the lack of respect for human rights."

Peña Nieto expressed deep concern about the Iguala situation in a statement to reporters in early October. "I feel deeply outraged and dismayed," the president said. "I regret, in particular, the violence that occurred and especially that it was young students who were affected and whose rights were violated in the city of Iguala."

As part of the response to the situation, federal forces disarmed municipal police officers in Iguala and assumed all security functions. "I have instructed [my security cabinet] to take action, clarify the facts, find those responsible [for these disappearances], and strictly apply the law," the president said.
The president’s promise to take decisive action did not appease student protestors, who demanded accountability. "We demand the resignation of the governor, and, if the students don’t reappear, [President] Pena Nieto ought to resign, too," one protestors told reporters at a demonstration in Mexico City. "What happened to the students cannot be condoned. It speaks to a Mexico without law."

Other students from the Raúl Isidro Burgos School also criticized the president. "We want results, not words," said one. "We want the proper authorities to intervene to find our fellow students, which is also what their relatives want."

Some observers point out that Mexico’s reputation as a violent society is well-deserved, given the spate of high-profile incidents that have occurred during the past and current presidential administrations. "We now have Iguala. But before we had the crisis in Michoacán, and even before that we had Tamaulipas," said Jenaro Villamil, a columnist for the Mexico City weekly news magazine Proceso. Villamil referred, in particular, to the clashes between self-defense groups and drug cartels in Michoacán (SourceMex, Jan. 22, 2014), the mass killings of Central American migrants traveling through Tamaulipas (SourceMex, Sept. 8, 2010, and April 13, 2011), and the killing of gubernatorial candidate Rodolfo Torre Cantú in 2010 (SourceMex, June 30, 2010)

Villamil also mentioned the apparent execution of 22 people by Army personnel in the community of Tlatlaya in México state in June (SourceMex, Oct. 1, 2014). "To these series of events, you can add many others that point to the uncontrolled growth of the narco state," said the Proceso columnist.

Fred Álvarez, a columnist for the online news site La Otra Opinión, noted that Guerreros Unidos were involved in both the Tlatlaya and the Iguala massacres. "In the first case, they were the victims; in the second case, they were the perpetrators," said Álvarez.

Unclear why criminal organizations would target students

Criminal organizations have made the students a target, but the exact reason is unknown and theories abound. "[This] is a symptom of a systematic process that has been taking place in Mexico for years," journalist Ioan Grillo wrote from Iguala on Oct. 9. "Drug cartels are taking over chunks of government apparatus, from local police forces to city and state governments."

"It's not always clear, however, whether the local government is working for the drug cartels, or the other way around," said The Atlantic magazine.

David Gagne, a writer for the publication InSight Crime, said the criminal organization Guerreros Unidos was likely "acting as 'muscle' for corrupt local officials," since the cartel itself had little incentive to target the students.

Ricardo Alemán, a columnist for the daily newspaper El Universal, suggested that the students might have made some connections with a group that is a rival to Guerreros Unidos, as evidenced by the manner in which the bodies were apparently disposed. "This type of barbaric act is the trademark of a criminal organization, which knows that a body mutilated in this manner becomes a message for its enemies," said Alemán. "This is more than just a case of revenge. The mutilation, burning, and burial of bodies is a message of terror."

Still, there is no doubt that the students were direct targets. Anti-crime advocate Isabel Miranda de Wallace said the criminal organizations are paying police and other individuals like taxi drives about
2,000 pesos (US$148) to report on the activities of the students from the Raúl Isidro Burgos School. "Relatives have told me that this is the payment that these individuals have received for informing on the young people," said Miranda de Wallace, who heads the organization Alto al Secuestro.

The Raúl Isidro Burgos School has a reputation for producing students who radically oppose the political structure, including Lucio Cabañas and Genaro Vázquez, guerilla leaders during the 1970s. "We must remember that Cabañas and Vázquez studied in the Ayotzinapa Teacher Training College," journalist Jorge León said in an interview with the television network TeleSUR. "This school was part of the 1970s leftist effervescence that ignited after the Tlatelolco Massacre [in 1968]."

Widespread protests

The Iguala killings sparked widespread protests in Mexico and overseas on Oct. 8. There were organized demonstrations in 25 states in Mexico, with the largest taking place in Mexico City. Hundreds of participants in the demonstration in the Mexican capital marched from the Ángel de la Independencia monument to the huge Zócalo Square. Demonstrators shouted, "They took them alive, we want them alive."

"From the Ángel de la Independencia to the Zócalo, the streets were filled with students, teachers, and citizens carrying signs supporting the students of Ayotzinapa and rejecting the government," said Agencia de noticias Proceso (apro).

Protests were also organized in many cities overseas, including Munich, London, Madrid, Barcelona, Copenhagen, Quito, La Paz, and Buenos Aires.

The protests continued in the Guerrero capital of Chilpancingo in mid-October, with a group of demonstrators setting fire to offices and smashing windows in the state government palace and the municipal building. Students and parents were joined in the demonstrations by members of the regional teachers union (Coordinadora Estatal de Trabajadores de la Educación de Guerrero, CNTEG), who clashed with anti-riot police.

Chilpancingo Mayor Mario Moreno Marcos called for peace, urging protestors to halt the violent acts. He stressed that the attacks would not help authorities find the 43 missing students. [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Oct. 15, 2014, reported at 13.54 pesos per US$1.00.]

-- End --