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Insecurity Takes Back Seat to Immigration at Recent Summit Between Presidents Enrique Peña Nieto and Barack Obama

by Carlos Navarro

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When Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto and US President Barack Obama met at the White House on Jan. 6, the official reports from the summit highlighted one theme where the two leaders had broad agreement—immigration. This was certainly a safe topic, given Obama's executive order last year to ease some immigration restrictions, specifically a proposal to allow certain members of the undocumented-immigrant community to legalize their status in the US ([SourceMex, Dec. 10, 2014](#)). This was one issue where a beleaguered Peña Nieto has broad support of Mexican citizens. Speaking after his meeting with Obama, the Mexican president called the immigration initiative an "act of justice" and said his government would do everything in its power to help those Mexicans who qualify for the US immigration program to find the necessary documents.

While the two presidents also reached agreement on minor issues such as border crossings, aviation, and other issues, the elephant in the room was the question of insecurity in Mexico. Two related issues were barely discussed—at least from what we know from the official communiqués—the execution of 43 students from the Escuela Rural Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural teachers college of Ayotzinapa in Iguala, Guerrero state, and the continued unabated flow of weapons from the US into Mexico.

There is no record on whether Obama and Peña Nieto engaged in any substantive discussions on the seemingly out-of-control insecurity and violence in Mexico during their summit. The murder of the students from the teachers college in September has attracted angry demonstrations around the country ([SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2014](#), and [Oct. 29, 2014](#)). While former mayor José Luis Abarca and his wife María de los Ángeles Pineda are held directly responsible for ordering the killings, and ex-Gov. Ángel Aguirre was criticized for looking the other way in the face of corruption, all members of the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), the protests are also calling Peña Nieto and the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) to task. The common complaint is that the administration has done little to resolve the cases. Only the remains of one of the students, Alexander Mora Venancio, have been identified.

Report says federal police, military assisted with Iguala massacre

An investigative report published by the weekly news magazine Proceso in mid-December 2014 uncovered evidence that federal police and military collaborated with the local and state forces in the killing.

The report first mentioned the official version of events. "According to this version, municipal police from Iguala and the neighboring community of Cocula attacked and arrested the students, while the drug cartel Guerreros Unidos killed and burned them, all without the knowledge of federal authorities and the soldiers who were stationed in the area," said Proceso. "Nevertheless, the documents and testimony we have obtained reveal a totally different story."

Proceso said an unpublished report from the Guerrero state government to the federal Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB) indicated that state and federal authorities monitored the students closely. The report mentions in particular the Iguala-based 27th Battalion, which has a history of repression and impunity in Guerrero state.

"We have information that proves the federal government knew what was happening in the moment it was happening, and participated in it," reporter Anabel Hernández said in an interview with The Huffington Post. "The government has tried to hide this information."

This is the first account indicating that the federal government knew about the plot and that authorities not only failed to take preventative action but also collaborated with the attack by helping collect intelligence. With the report in the hands of SEGOB, it is almost certain that Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong was aware of the federal participation in the attacks. This means that President Peña Nieto was probably apprised of the situation.

There has been little comment from SEGOB or the Secretaría de Defensa Nacional (SEDENA) about the Proceso report. Peña Nieto insists that his administration is doing everything possible to try to resolve the case and locate the bodies of the remaining 42 students. "We have deployed more than 1,776 members from several divisions of the federal police," he said in written testimony to the Senate. "We have formed four brigades to conduct the search, comprising family members, local police, and federal police." The president said the government is using two helicopters, two reconnaissance aircraft, and a team of six divers as part of the search.

Peña Nieto defends his administration in US opinion piece

The Mexican president did address the killings briefly in an opinion piece published in the US political magazine *Politico* ahead of his meeting with Obama. "The tragic and despicable events that took place last September in Guerrero have been met by my government with decisive action: Over 70 individuals, including the masterminds, are already being prosecuted, and I will continue to stress that there is no room for impunity," said the Mexican president. "Last November, I took steps to strengthen the rule of law and to promote fundamental reforms in the realms of security, law enforcement and criminal justice. We are focusing our efforts on shoring up institutional strength at the local level to prevent these types of events from ever being repeated."

There was no mention of the Iguala incident in the statement that followed Peña Nieto's meeting with the US president on Jan. 6. The Mexican president, however, took the opportunity to thank President Obama for his willingness to continue working together on matters of security, "in the face of Mexico's clear challenge to combat organized crime with greater forcefulness and efficiency."

Peña Nieto came to the meeting with Obama as a weakened leader, hurt not only by his administration's inability to address insecurity in Mexico but also suspicions that members of his party have long colluded with criminal organizations. On top of that, the president has been unable to escape charges of corruption, including recent news that the president and his wife, actress Angélica Rivera, were living in a sprawling mansion in Mexico City owned by government contractor Arturo Reyes Gómez, an executive with Grupo Higa. Because of the scandal, Peña Nieto was forced to cancel a concession for the construction of a high-speed rail line to a Chinese-Mexican consortium that included Grupo Higa ([SourceMex, Dec. 3, 2014](#)).

Reports later surfaced that Finance Secretary Luis Videgaray was also living in a mansion owned by Reyes Gomez's Grupo Higa.

"Peña Nieto desperately tried to appear statesmanlike amid the storm that has arisen from the Sept. 26 student massacre in the state of Guerrero and the accusations of conflicts of interest against him, his wife and his finance minister over homes purchased from a government contractor," Irma Eréndira Sandoval, a political analyst at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), wrote in a column carried by the Al Jazeera news wire.

Peña Nieto's visit to the White House resulted in dozens of demonstrations around the US, with protestors demanding an end to impunity in Mexico. The demonstrations were also aimed at Obama, criticizing the US administration for blind support for Peña Nieto and the bloody drug war in Mexico. "USA puts the guns and consumes the drugs, Mexico puts the dead!" one protest sign read.

"Obama confuses Mexico with Peña Nieto and his government. The real allies in the struggle for peace and justice in Mexico are the families and colleagues of the students from the Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural teachers' college of Ayotzinapa in Guerrero who were abducted and massacred," said the Al Jazeera article.

"The [Isidro Burgos] school embodies both the utopian, democratic, liberationist ideals of the Mexican Revolution and the political commitment of the people of Guerrero," added Sandoval, who heads UNAM's Laboratorio de Documentación y Análisis de la Corrupción y la Transparencia. "In fact, the bold, grass-roots leadership of the parents and classmates of the missing students is precisely what has enabled Mexico's popular movement for peace and justice to grow so strong. Their demands should be supported by the US and other nations."

Weapons continue flowing into Mexico

There was no indication that Mexico pressed the US on another contentious issue: the unabated flow of high-caliber weapons into Mexico. Just a year ago, Obama, Peña Nieto, and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper pledged to work together to halt the illegal trafficking of weapons in the region and to combat money laundering ([SourceMex, Feb. 26, 2014](#)). The easy flow of high-caliber weapons from the US to Mexico has long been a source of conflict between the two countries ([SourceMex, April 1, 2009](#), [March 23, 2011](#), and [March 20, 2013](#)).

A week after Peña Nieto's meeting with Obama, the Centro de Estudios Sociales y de Opinión Pública (CESOP) released a report indicating that 13 million of the 15 million weapons circulating in Mexico as of 2012 were illegal. The report said an average of 2,000 weapons a day are smuggled into Mexico from the US.

The study, compiled by congressional researcher José de Jesús González Rodríguez, indicated that the incessant flow of weapons to drug traffickers has been a major factor behind the drug-related violence in Mexico, resulting in more than 60,000 deaths since 2006, according to unofficial estimates.

The report said two out of every three weapons involved in criminal acts in Mexico were manufactured or imported from the US, and 40% of the weapons that end up in the hands of drug traffickers originated in the state of Texas.

"In Mexico, it is almost impossible to buy a weapon legally. But in the US states that border Mexico, there are more than 8,000 arms dealers," said the study. "Mexican cartels are able to easily acquire firearms through intermediaries at gun shows."

"It has been speculated that, without the earnings obtained from drug trafficking, the criminal organizations would have difficulty attaining their current firepower. And without the flow of arms from the US toward our country, the Mexican criminal syndicates would not have the opportunity to amass the supplies of weapons that they used to fight the government and to threaten the security of our citizens," said the report.

CESOP cited a joint study produced by the University of San Diego in California and Brazil's Instituto Igarapé, which estimates that US sellers earn about US\$127 million per year through the trafficking of weapons to Mexico.

Sen. Angélica de la Peña Gómez, chair of the human rights committee (Comisión de Derechos Humanos) in the upper house, said the Peña Nieto government has failed to take action to even slow down the flow of all types of illegal weapons into Mexico, from handguns to high-caliber armaments and other military equipment like grenade launchers.

"Evidently, authorities have not strengthened the channels of collaboration and exchange of information with governments and international entities," said de la Peña Gómez, a member of the PRD.

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