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Independent Experts Provide New Scientific Evidence to Dispute Mexican Government Report on Fate of 43 Students in Guerrero

by Carlos Navarro

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A group of independent experts investigating the murder of 43 students from a teachers college in Guerrero state (Escuela Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa Raúl Isidro Burgos) has presented new scientific evidence to back its conclusion in September that the bodies of the students were not incinerated at a garbage dump in the town of Cocula ([SourceMex, Sept. 16, 2015](#)).

The government report suggested that the criminal organization Guerreros Unidos kidnapped and murdered the 43 students and incinerated their bodies at the Cocula garbage dump ([SourceMex, Jan. 28, 2015](#)).

The initial report from the five-member Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes (GIEI), which is working under the auspices of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), had based its conclusions in September on an investigation of the Cocula dump conducted by José Torero, a renowned Peruvian expert on fire, who visited the site on July 13. Torero's report said, "The minimum amount of fire needed to cremate the bodies could not have occurred" at the dump in Cocula, not even to burn one body.

New report cites satellite images

The new GIEI report, released in early December, cited satellite images to back the conclusion reached by Torero that no fire occurred at the Cocula dump on the days when the government alleged that the bodies had been burned at the site.

The images show there was only one fire in Guerrero state on the night the students disappeared, and it was not at the garbage dump.

"The satellite images captured all the daytime and nighttime fires, and there was no fire in the Cocula area" on Sept. 26 and Sept. 27, 2014," Ángela Buitrago, a Colombian prosecutor who is one of the members of the GIEI, said during a press conference in Mexico City.

"Satellite imagery can capture day and nighttime fires, but none was registered in that zone. This development allows us to focus our search for the students in other places," said GIEI member Alejandro Valencia, a Colombian attorney.

The GIEI also pointed out that weather records show nearly 22 millimeters (about 0.8 inches) of rainfall was recorded in Iguala, which is about 22 kilometers (13 miles) from Cocula, between 1 a.m. and 4 a.m. on Sept. 27.

The GIEI team – which also includes former Guatemalan prosecutor Claudia Paz y Paz, Chilean lawyer Francisco Cox Vial, and Spanish physician Carlos Beristáin – urged the government to

process the new evidence independently of other conclusions that had been reached since the incident took place 14 months ago.

Critics accuse experts of jumping to conclusions

Other analysts have urged the GIEI not to jump to conclusions so quickly based on the data they gathered. Guillermo Martínez, a specialist in geomatics (the gathering and processing of geographic information) at Universidad Loyola del Pacífico in Acapulco, said cloud cover over Cocula would have made it impossible to see a fire, had there been one. In addition, he said, there is only one satellite that could have photographed the area and it only does so at about noon each day.

Detractors also say that the possibility exists that rain might have fallen in Iguala and not in Cocula. "Iguala stands more than 20 km from Cocula and the two communities are separated by a mountainous region, and it could have rained in one spot and not the other," columnist Luis Cárdenas wrote in the daily newspaper El Universal. "Weather reports indicate there was light rain in Iguala – and not the storm that these experts have suggested."

The Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) also asked the GIEI to avoid reaching early conclusions, pointing out that the simple study of satellite imagery and weather conditions should not be considered in isolation and that other elements must be taken into account.

The government's version of events is based partly on interrogations of some members of criminal organizations who are said to have participated in the kidnapping and murder of the students. Three men – Patricio Reyes, Jhonatan Osorio and Agustín García – confessed to having killed the students and burned their bodies at the dump.

The GIEI team raised concerns at the press conference that the PGR has drawn some of its conclusions from interrogation of 115 suspects connected to the case, and nearly three-quarters of those detainees have shown some sort of injury that could be the result of mistreatment or torture. The IACHR experts also noted that the government has conducted searches in 670 locations and has been unable to provide any answers.

DNA studies of remains collected at different locations have revealed the identities of only two of the students. Experts at the Medical University of Innsbruck in Austria have been able to identify remains of Jhosivani Guerrero de la Cruz and Alexander Mora Venancio, but the fate and whereabouts of their fellow students remain a mystery.

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