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Carlos Navarro

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Questions Persist on Disappearance of Students from Guerrero Teachers College

by Carlos Navarro
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Many questions remain unanswered two years after the massacre of 43 students from a teachers college (Escuela Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa Raúl Isidro Burgos) near the municipality of Iguala (SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2014, and Oct. 29, 2014). The incident is commonly known as the Ayotzinapa case.

The biggest unresolved issue in relation to the incident, which occurred on Sept. 26, 2014, is the whereabouts of the students or their remains. DNA tests of evidence collected from a garbage dump in the nearby community of Cocula had tentatively identified the remains of two of the students (SourceMex, Dec. 16, 2015). However, the experts who conducted the tests at the Institute of Legal Medicine at the Medical University in Innsbruck, Austria, issued a report in April amending those earlier conclusions. The investigators said it was not possible to establish genetic profiles through DNA testing and that further tests would be conducted.

Their conclusions support the reports produced by an independent group of experts (Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes, GIEI), affiliated with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). After conducting its own exhaustive investigation, the GIEI cast doubt on the government’s theory that the killers had incinerated the bodies at the Cocula garbage dump. Among other things, the independent investigators found a series of irregularities in the government’s reports on the disappearance of the students (SourceMex, Sept. 16, 2015, and Dec. 16, 2015). The GIEI report put the independent investigators in conflict with President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration.

Chief investigator under fire

There is also some evidence of a cover-up. In a video presented by the GIEI, Tomás Zerón, then director of the Agencia de Investigación Criminal (Criminal Investigations Agency, AIC) is seen at Río San Juan, where plastic bags containing burned remains were discovered and where a bone fragment from one of the students was identified—the only positive identification in the case. The AIC is part of the attorney general’s office (Procuraduría General de la República PGR).

Official government records show that the bags were discovered by divers on Oct. 29, 2014. However, the GIEI video shows Zerón at the river with the plastic bags a day before the evidence was officially recorded as being found. “The government’s failure to investigate and sanction Zerón’s actions and those of other officials who allegedly tampered with evidence and tortured suspects makes it clear that the government is protecting its own and that there will be no consequences for those involved in the cover-up,” said Maureen Meyer, who monitors Mexico for the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA).

The GIEI’s aggressive investigation of the case did not sit well with the Peña Nieto government, which decided not to renew the mandate for the GIEI to continue the probe (SourceMex, April 20, 2016). However, the administration’s decision attracted significant criticism, which prompted
the Peña Nieto government to accept a return of the IACHR, but not the GIEI, to oversee the investigation (SourceMex, Aug. 10, 2016).

Despite calls for his resignation, Zerón remained in his post for almost two years after the incident. He finally left the job on Sept. 12. Two days later, he was named to the high-level post of technical secretary of the administration’s national security council (Consejo de Seguridad Nacional). In that capacity, Zerón would answer directly to the president.

The questions about Zerón’s role in the case led the PGR to conduct an internal investigation, the results of which were released on Sept. 22. It concluded that Zerón did violate procedures when conducting his probe into the Ayotzinapa case and that he worked without supervision of the Ministerio Público, the federal agency responsible for the investigation and prosecution of federal crimes.

The internal investigation also discovered that Gualberto Ramírez Gutiérrez, the prosecutor in charge of the unit that investigates abductions (Unidad Especializada en Investigación de Delitos en Materia de Secuestro) also committed irregularities while conducting his portion of the Ayotzinapa probe.

The PGR recommended that both Zerón and Ramírez Gutiérrez be sanctioned by the Secretaría de la Función Pública (SFP), the ministry that monitors the activities of public officials.

There is some question as to whether Zerón will be punished at all. If he is sanctioned, there are concerns that he might receive a slap on the hand, given his role as a top national security official for Peña Nieto.

**Parents demand justice**

This has angered the parents of the students and hindered efforts on the part of Attorney General Arely Gómez to open avenues for dialogue. On Aug. 18, 2016, the parents walked out of a meeting with Gómez when she could not promise that Zerón would be punished. “We decided not to listen, and we informed the attorney general that we would not meet again with her until Tomás Zerón’s responsibility in the case is resolved,” said Felipe de la Cruz, a spokesperson for the parents.

Gómez’s efforts to conduct a more transparent and open investigation into the Ayotzinapa case stand in stark contrast to those of her predecessor, Jesús Murillo Karam. In his initial report, Murillo Karam suggested that local police, under then-Iguala Mayor José Luis Abarca, detained the students and turned them over to the drug cartel Guerreros Unidos, which executed the students and disposed of the bodies. The report—Murillo Karam called it the “historic truth” about the incident—did not mention any participation from federal police or the armed forces.

Murillo Karam’s version of events raised enough questions that he became a political liability for the Peña Nieto government, and he was reassigned to another post in the administration (SourceMex, March 11, 2015).

Gómez initially did little to expand the investigation but has lately made some decisions that promise greater transparency

“Two years [after the Ayotzinapa incident], the PGR, now led by Arely Gómez, continues to explore all possible lines of investigation,” columnist Yuriria Sierra wrote in the daily newspaper Excélsior. “The so-called ‘historic truth’ has been set aside to allow space for all questions to be examined. We
now know that there are 40 new sites were clandestine graves have been identified. Perhaps they contain the remains of the students.”

According to Sierra, the administration is making use of a technological tool known as Lidar, used in archeology and mining, to try to find the remains of the students. Lidar uses tridimensional imaging to find objects hidden underground.

The PGR has also expressed willingness to work closely with Jan Jarab, who represents the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Mexico, to resolve the case. Jarab met with the parents of the disappeared students on Sept. 21.

“This is a sign of support from the international community for the parents, who continue to search for their children,” Sierra said. “This is also a demand on the global level that this case not remain mired in impunity.”

Still, Sierra noted that few questions have been answered since the incident two years ago. “Exactly 24 months have gone by since that sad night in Iguala,” said the columnist. “We continue to remember the 43 students. However, what is more painful is that there are those who continue waiting for them. What else could they do, in light of the lack of certainty in the face of many contradictions from those responsible for the investigation?”