

## **“Mexico’s Human Rights Crisis Deepens”**

Source: Kent Paterson, [“Mexico’s Human Rights Crisis Deepens”](#), Americas Program of the Center for International Policy, March 29<sup>th</sup> 2013

In the first few months of the administration of Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto, the human rights thermometer is burning red. Although officials from the new administration embrace human rights in their discourse, events on the ground tell another story. Migrants, indigenous communities, women, social activists, journalists and many others confront mounting threats.

Moreover, landmark sentences in verdicts previously handed down by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights against the Mexican state remain uncompleted, even while new complaints pile up in the Washington, D.C.-based Inter-American Commission for Human Rights (IACHR).

The depth of the human rights crisis was more than evident when Mexican activists and human rights attorneys presented several new cases to the IACHR at its March session in Washington. Among the complaints were the May 2006 rapes and sexual assaults of women protestors in San Salvador Atenco, a rural town outside Mexico City that had long been at loggerheads with the government.

Speaking on behalf of the Atenco survivors, Barbara Italia Mendez graphically described what happened to her after Mexico state and federal police raided the town in a crackdown on a popular rebellion that left two people dead, many others detained and at least 27 women subjected to sexual attacks by officers.

“(Police) began to say obscene phrases about my body, about my condition as a woman. They told me this was happening because I had not stayed at home,” Italia said in a statement broadcast on Radio Bilingue. Italia then detailed how she was sexually molested, vaginally penetrated, and bitten by officers. At the time of the raid, Pena Nieto was governor of Mexico state.

The women in the Atenco case rejected a Mexican government offer for a “friendly solution” to their case, a proposed resolution of the matter which would have avoided the IACHR process and investigation of the Mexican state’s conduct.

The IACHR commissioners also heard presentations about the highly questioned 2001 death of human rights lawyer Digna Ochoa, the displacement of six indigenous Raramuri and Tepehuan communities in Chihuahua, the systematic media exhibition of suspects before trial, and the persistence of forced disappearance.

In response to victims’ testimonies, an official Mexican delegation outlined the new administration’s initiatives and vowed to keep human rights as a pillar of policy. The Foreign Relations Ministry (SRE) reiterated the government’s “commitment to advance in national human rights efforts, deepen its dialogue with civil society organizations and maintain cooperation with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States.”

SRE undersecretary for multilateral affairs and human rights, Juan Manuel Gomez Robledo, and Lia Limon Garcia, a one-time legislator for the conservative National Action Party who is the new

undersecretary for legal affairs and human rights in the Interior Ministry, represented the Pena Nieto administration at the hearings. Local representatives from Chihuahua, Mexico and Mexico City joined federal officials in the Washington delegation.

Capping the session, a network of more than 80 Mexican non-governmental organizations requested that the IACHR conduct a fact-finding tour of Mexico, which would be the first such visit since 1996.

### **Attacks Continue**

Even as the IACHR met in Washington to consider past abuses, new attacks against activists, activists and journalists were unfolding in Mexico. Members of the Guerrero state Truth Commission, established by the state government to uncover the fates of more than 600 people forcibly disappeared in the state by government security forces during the Dirty War of the 1970s, recently reported receiving warnings to desist from their probe.

On March 13, Guerrero state police arrested Rocio Mesino, leader of a faction of the Campesino Organization of the Southern Sierra Madres (OCSS), on a murder charge. Supporters immediately denounced the charge as trumped up to neutralize the internationally known activist and former elected official. The arrest came at a moment when the OCSS was discussing the possibility of forming an independent community police force in the region around the troubled town of Atoyac de Alvarez.

Mesino was jailed in the notorious Acapulco penitentiary, but released less than a week later after protests and a ruling by a judge that there was no evidence to substantiate the murder charge. Since the formation of the OCSS in 1994, dozens of its members have been jailed or murdered. The OCSS organized a protest caravan that was attacked by Guerrero State Police at Aguas Blancas in 1995. The incident left 17 unarmed farmers massacred by police bullets.

On the deepening tragedy of the Central American exodus across Mexico, activists are sounding the alarm bell that the extortion, sexual abuse and other crimes committed against migrants passing through the country on their way to the U.S continue unabated under the Pena Nieto administration. In a communiqué, Amnesty International charged that the new authorities have failed to take “any steps toward correcting the absolute failure of the previous government to confront this humanitarian crisis.”

On March 17, the Mesoamerican Migrant Movement (MMM) publicized death threats against Father Tomas Gonzalez, director of a church-associated migrant shelter in Tenosique, Tabasco, one of the first major stops in the long route from Central America that is crowded by criminal gangs and Mexican officials who prey on migrants, according to numerous accounts by migrants and their advocates.

“Threats to (Gonzalez’s) life are more and more direct and near, and the criminal operators have increased their attempts to infiltrate the shelter, terrorizing the migrants who denounce them as well as their defenders,” the activist group declared. Earlier, Ruben Figueroa, a leader of the MMM, also received death threats.

The first few months of the Pena Nieto era have been a bleak time for the press. As the new year rolled forward, *El Siglo de Torreon* and *El Diario de Juarez* newspapers were attacked by gunmen, as was Channel 44 in Ciudad Juarez.

On March 3, journalist Jaime Guadalupe Gonzalez Dominguez was murdered in the border town of Ojinaga, Chihuahua. In the south, photojournalist Felix Marquez of the prestigious *Cuartroscuro* magazine fled Veracruz after the state's highest ranking public security official made intimidating comments about Marquez's photos, which portrayed an armed community self-defense group authorities denied existed.

Anabel Hernandez, the author of a book that ties government officials with drug trafficking, told the press she had canceled a presentation in the state of Chihuahua because her safety would be in jeopardy.

The sounds of silence also shrouded Coahuila, where El Zocalo newspaper chain announced it will no longer report on organized crime as a preventative measure to protect the safety of its staff.

El Zocalo followed in the footsteps of the long-silenced local press in neighboring Tamaulipas state, where the dangers posed to a misinformed or uninformed society were rudely illustrated in the border city of Reynosa when rival factions of the Gulf drug cartel engaged in large-scale shootouts that paralyzed the town this month. Stripped of a vigorous local media, residents had to rely on social media and press outlets in neighboring McAllen, Texas, for vital life-and-death news.

Surveying the media scene, Ciudad Juarez sociologist Carlos Murrillo Gonzalez warned of a growing threat to the greater body politic. "Censorship, curfews, silence and anonymous denunciations become the tools to further divide society," Murrillo wrote in the [Arrobajuarez.com](http://Arrobajuarez.com) portal.

The latest assaults on the press solidify the trend of aggression and impunity. A March report by the international press advocacy organization Article 19 documented 207 aggressions against the Mexican press in 2012- a year in which such incidents rose 20 percent over the previous one- including 7 murders, 2 disappearances, 8 kidnappings and 98 physical assaults. Significantly, [Article 19 determined](#) that nearly half of the aggressions (44 percent) were attributable to government officials.

"A law was passed in 2012 making killing a journalist a federal crime, and requiring that all cases are investigated by the attorney general. This system is not working," Article 19 noted. The advocacy group called on the President of Mexico to put real teeth into the special prosecutor charged with investigating crimes against journalists.

In the months and years ahead, the Pena Nieto administration's overall commitment to human rights and the rule of law will be tested by its compliance with obligatory sentences flowing from five cases ruled on by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights during the former presidency of Felipe Calderon.

Four of the five cases involve human rights violations by soldiers in the state of Guerrero. While the Calderon administration partially complied with the sentences- usually those sections mandating a government apology and publication of the verdict- key parts of the sentences

ordering the punishment of human rights violators remain unfulfilled, even though in many cases the perpetrators have long been identified.

Perhaps worse yet, the broader conditions that prompted the Inter-American Court litigation in the first place persist. Take for example, the case of Guerrero environmentalists Rodolfo Montiel and Teodoro Cabrera who won a 2010 Inter-American Court judgment against the Mexican government for tortures suffered at the hands of Mexican soldiers when the two men were arrested in 1999 after becoming active in a movement against logging.

Montiel, co-founded the Campesino Environmentalist Organization of Petatlan and Coyuca de Catatlan (OCESP) along with the late Felipe Arreaga and other small farmers in the late 1990s. Since then, the human rights landscape in the mountain homeland of Montiel and Cabrera has only worsened. Montiel was granted political asylum in the United States several years ago, based on evidence of persecution.

Two recent leaders of the OCESP, Eva Alarcon and Marciel Bautista, were kidnapped by men identified as police officers in late 2011 and never seen again. Continued conflicts in the Guerrero mountains involving logging, drug trafficking and territorial control have left dozens murdered and hundreds of others displaced within the past four years alone, according to various press and local accounts.

A major backsliding in human rights also shapes the legacy of a 2009 femicide case against the Mexican state. The successful legal complaint was pursued by the mothers of three young women who were found murdered in a Ciudad Juarez cotton field back in 2001. The killings fit a long pattern of young women seemingly vanishing from the face of the earth only later to be found in clusters of brutally murdered victims showing signs of torture and rape.

The Mexican federal and Chihuahua state governments have declared compliance with many provisions of the Inter-American Court sentence, including the standard apology, publication of the sentence, compensation of victims' survivors, the training of justice officials in human rights and gender perspectives, and investigations of reported disappearances.

Nonetheless, the Cotton Field murderers remain unpunished while a new wave of post-2008 disappearances haunts Ciudad Juarez. Since last year, the remains of some of the young women who went missing after 2008 have been discovered in the nearby Juarez Valley in a manner similar to the cotton field and other earlier victims.

Relatives and activists who have organized and spoken out against gender violence have been systematically persecuted and attacked. In addition to the 2010 murder of Marisela Escobedo, who was slain across from the Chihuahua governor's office while demanding justice for her daughter's murder, members of Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa (May our Daughters Return Home), were forced to flee Ciudad Juarez after a series of threats and incidents that included a home arson and shooting.

Most recently, activists with a similar group, The Committee of Mothers and Relatives of Disappeared Daughters, were forced to abandon Ciudad Juarez when they received threats after participating in a protest march to the state capital of Chihuahua City.

In February, mother Karla Castaneda fled to the United States, where she was granted humanitarian parole along with her four children, while the committee's legal advisor, Francisca Galvan, likewise crossed the border reportedly seeking refuge. Castaneda and Galvan were but the latest of a growing number of activists, journalists and others who've sought sanctuary in the United States, Canada and Europe because of their inability to safely speak out and organize in Mexico.

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**For More Information:**

Videos of IACHR March 2013 Mexico sessions <http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/audiencias/Hearings.aspx?Lang=en&Session=131&page=2>

Mexican civil society network 2013 report on human rights to the IACHR (Spanish)

[http://www.redtdt.org.mx/d\\_informes/d\\_visual.php?id\\_publicacion=191&descargable=147%20InformeFinalCIDHMexico2013.pdf](http://www.redtdt.org.mx/d_informes/d_visual.php?id_publicacion=191&descargable=147%20InformeFinalCIDHMexico2013.pdf)

Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa <http://www.mujeresdejuarez.org/>

Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center <http://www.centroprodh.org.mx/>

Justicia Para Nuestras Hijas (Justice for Our Daughters) <http://justiciaparanuestrashijas.blogspot.com/>

Centro de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres (Women's Human Rights Center) <http://cedehm.blogspot.com/>