

Assassination of Mexican human rights activist provokes political crisis

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The assassination of Mexican human rights attorney Digna Ochoa last month has focused attention on the continuing threats and outright terror facing workers and political dissidents in the country.

Ochoa, 37 years old, was shot in the head on October 19 in her Mexico City office. No robbery had taken place, and police found a note near the body threatening “the same fate” to other activists. “This will happen to another ... this is not a joke,” the message declared.

Ochoa had been threatened with death on many occasions in recent years, after she took a prominent role in defending jailed Zapatista rebels as well as two imprisoned environmental activists, Rodolfo Montiel and Teodoro Cabrera, who have been declared “prisoners of conscience” by Amnesty International. Under growing international pressure, Mexican President Vicente Fox ordered the release of Montiel and Cabrera on November 8.

The two men, leaders of the Organization of Peasant Farmer Ecologists from the Pacific coast state of Guerrero, carried out protests against illegal logging by local political bosses which was causing widespread deforestation. In retribution, they were imprisoned in May 1999 on trumped-up charges of marijuana cultivation and arms possession. They lost several appeals, despite official admissions that they had been kidnapped and tortured.

Soon after the jailing of Montiel and Cabrera, Ochoa was kidnapped on the street in broad daylight. In October of that year, she was attacked in her own home, tied up, blindfolded and interrogated for nine hours about the Miguel Agustin Pro Human Rights Center (Prodh), of which she was then director. The attackers opened a gas cylinder as they left, but Ochoa survived after freeing herself and escaping.

Ochoa believed her attackers were backed by elements of the military itself, either from Guerrero or elsewhere.

She left Mexico last year, after one of the numerous threats against her life. In March 2001 she returned and began her own legal practice.

Mexican President Fox took three days to condemn the assassination of Ochoa. He spoke out only after numerous foreign officials, including those from the US State Department and the European Union, had issued their own statements. The president at first referred to the case as “just one more murder in the capital.” According to a spokesman of Prodh, Fox “did not know who Digna Ochoa was, nor what Prodh was ... his total ignorance makes it look as if he was governing another country.”

Fox, the leader of the right-wing National Action Party (PAN), took office 11 months ago, ending more than 70 years of rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The new president promised action against repression and inequality, claiming there would be an investigation of past police and army abuses.

In the months leading up to the murder of Ochoa, these pledges led to nothing. Fox was clearly reluctant to undertake a probe that would show the role of forces within the military and police apparatus itself in decades of political repression, including the massacre of hundreds of Mexican student protesters at the time of the 1968 Olympics, and numerous instances of torture and killings in the following decades. All the leading bourgeois parties of Mexico, including the PRI, PAN and the left-nationalist PRD, have reason to fear where such an investigation would lead as well as the social forces that could be unleashed by it.

Instead of exposing the roots of police terror, Fox appointed Rafael Macedo de la Concha, a brigadier general who had been the chief military prosecutor in the case against Montiel and Cabrera, as the federal attorney general. Last May Macedo called off the probe into the earlier attacks on Ms. Ochoa. The Fox government then claimed that protection orders that had been issued for

Ochoa in 1999 were no longer warranted.

Human rights activists insisted that these actions had encouraged the killers of Ochoa. “Digna’s death was the culmination of a long history of threats and aggression that found no response,” said the Rev. Edgar Cortez, the director of the Prodh.

Barbara Zamora, a lawyer who worked with Ochoa most recently, said the office received frequent telephone threats. “Sometimes we pick up the telephone and we hear a woman screaming,” she said. “Sometime it’s the sound of a machine gun. Once it was the theme from *The Godfather*. In any case, the message is clear.”

A report released last week by the National Network of Civil Organizations for All Rights for Everyone documents eight examples of threats against rights workers since Fox took office. The incidents occurred in the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero, Jalisco, Tamaulipas and the Federal District of Mexico City.

Ochoa was well aware of the dangers she faced. On August 21, just two months before she was murdered, she sent an informal will in the form of an email message to her sister, asking her to print it out and then delete it from the computer.

“I wanted to write you because it is less likely that our communication would be intercepted,” the letter began. “I will not talk about this with you by telephone, and although I don’t want to worry you I want to make certain that you have my instructions if something happens to be. I ask that you and Juan Jose [her boyfriend] take charge of my things. He should take what he needs, and you will see about the rest. With this, I am not saying that I think I am going to die (bitter herbs never die), but I prefer to talk about it so that there are no doubts.”

Ochoa’s death was followed by additional threats. An anonymous note demanded 30 million pesos from the federal government in order to prevent the murders of five other human rights advocates. Lawyers for Montiel and Cabrera expressed worries for their safety after their release.

The death of Ochoa has provoked an international response, and not only from such organizations as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Offering advice to Fox the *New York Times*, *Houston Chronicle* and other US papers have warned the Mexican president that measures are necessary to restore “confidence” that his government will put an end to such murders. Most recently the *Washington Post* complained that Fox’s response to the assassination was inadequate.

“Once Ms. Ochoa was murdered, Mr. Fox did not

respond publicly for three days,” the *Post* wrote. “Finally, he met with human rights groups and set up a civilian commission to keep an eye on the investigation. But appointing an official commission is old-style Mexican politics; it won’t help much if, as in the cases of other high-profile Mexican political murders in recent years, the investigation stalls as it begins to touch on powerful interests.... [Fox] must ensure that federal officials and the military cooperate fully with the investigation, especially if the evidence points to official involvement.”

This segment of the US political and media establishment is worried that the latest developments threaten to destroy the carefully crafted image of Fox as some kind of reformer on the Mexican political scene, and the release of Montiel and Cabrera is clearly an attempt to undo some of the damage. In a statement to the press on November 8 Fox said, “With this, we show, by our actions, my government’s commitment to the promotion and observance of human rights in our country.”

The political crisis that surfaced with the October 19 assassination will not be so easily resolved. Political stability in Mexico is also being undermined by the deepening worldwide economic crisis. Fox’s political success thus far has owed much to the claim that his ties to Washington would somehow help the tens of millions of impoverished Mexicans achieve some measurable improvement in their conditions of life. But 85 percent of Mexico’s exports are destined for the United States, and the unmistakable signs of a sharp economic downturn in the US, as well as in Europe and Japan, will mean even greater unemployment and poverty in Mexico.



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