

Mexican rights group exposes government's whitewash of student massacres

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On October 19, the Committee of 68 led a rally in front of Mexico's Supreme Court in Mexico City to demand an independent investigation into the student massacres of 1968 and 1971 and the "dirty war" of which these two events were a part.

The rally followed an October 2 march by 6,000 protesters in Mexico City, marking the 37th anniversary of the Tlatelolco Massacre. On October 2, 1968 hundreds of students protesting government repression were ambushed and mowed down by the Mexican army at the Three Cultures Square in Tlatelolco, Mexico City.

Over 300 students were killed and 6,000 arrested. Tanks and troops in riot gear surrounded the student march, while snipers on the rooftops fired upon them. Many of the bodies were never recovered because they were thrown into the ocean from airplanes.

At both of the recent protests, Committee of 68 leaders denounced the role of lower courts that have refused to allow the indictment of top political officials, including former president Luis Echeverría, in connection with the massacres.

According to the Mexican Daily *La Jornada*, Jesús Martín del Campo, speaking on behalf of the Committee of 68, singled out the fifth unitary tribunal and the 15th District Court for "insisting on building a system of impunity in our country." The former court exonerated Echeverría and former chief of staff Mario Moya from responsibility "on the basis of senseless and dishonest arguments," according to Campo. Echeverría was interior minister in 1968 and president in 1971; Moya was his chief of staff.

The courts also refused to issue arrest warrants ordered by the special prosecutor against several former officials deemed responsible for the massacre in Tlatelolco.

The Committee of 68 rally took place in the wake of the Mexico City municipal legislature's approval of a nonbinding resolution demanding that the Supreme Court launch an investigation into the 1971 massacre, in line with Article 97 of the Mexican constitution.

Also known as the *halconazo*, this massacre took place June 10, 1971 when a paramilitary group directed by Echeverría and Moya attacked a peaceful student demonstration in Mexico City's San Cosme district. A paramilitary squad, the Falcons

(*halcones*, in Spanish), massacred dozens of students. Hundreds were injured.

However the Supreme Court refused on July 27 to indict the two men, claiming that the crime of genocide does not apply.

As a result of that decision, on September 6 the Committee of 68 presented a grievance to the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (IHRIC), requesting its assistance in bringing to justice those responsible. By keeping the issue alive, the Committee of 68 and other human rights organizations are laying bare the complex relationship between Mexico's political institutions and the armed forces and exposing the refusal by the government of President Vicente Fox to fully investigate and prosecute the perpetrators of both massacres.

In its complaint, the Committee of 68 accused the Mexican government of systematically obstructing justice over the 1971 massacre.

A 30-year statute of limitations for common crimes had protected the presumed masterminds of the massacre, together with the actual perpetrators, from being charged.

However, a special commission set up by the Fox administration charged Echeverría and Moya with the crime of genocide (not covered by the statute of limitations) for deliberately targeting a specific social layer—students—for extermination. In its July decision, the Supreme Court agreed with Echeverría's lawyers' narrow definition of genocide and excluded students for not being part of any national or ethnic group. Fox's reaction was to support the court decision.

Over the years, Echeverría has denied any responsibility in the massacre. His lawyers concede that the Falcons were part of the security apparatus, but argue that their orders were merely to break up the student protest, claiming that the paramilitary group may have exceeded its authority. This explanation flies in the face of the facts.

On June 10, 1971, 1,000 Falcons, armed with wooden poles and machine guns, attacked 10,000 students marching in Mexico City in solidarity with a struggle by students in the city of Monterrey. The paramilitary squad proceeded to cut off escape routes and beat and shot students while the police looked on without interfering. The exact number of victims is not known. According to most estimates, between 36 and 50 were killed. Another 50 disappeared and are now presumed

dead, and hundreds were arrested. Only six bodies were returned to their families. Authorities now admit to 25 deaths.

The *halconazo* was an episode in a dirty war that began in Mexico in 1964 with the repression of medical students. It included assaults on agricultural communities, the summary executions of left-wing teachers and newspaper reporters and the kidnapping and disappearance of hundreds of individuals.

The Falcons and other death squads operated with impunity across southern Mexico and in the major cities, particularly in Guadalajara and Mexico City. The dirty war was undertaken with the full knowledge and approval of the US administration of Richard Nixon in Washington. Echeverría was considered a “close collaborator” by the CIA, together with Gustavo Diaz Ordaz, who was president in 1968.

Committee of 68 leader Alejandro Alvarez told the *World Socialist Web Site* that a series of judicial decisions have granted “total immunity” to the perpetrators of the *halconazo* and other events in the clandestine war that the Mexican government conducted against students and peasants in the 1960s and 1970s. (See “Interview with Mexican Committee of 68 member”)

“Instead of having doors opened to us, we have received only negative answers,” said Alvarez. The Committee is involved in getting at the truth of both the 1968 and 1971 massacres.

The Committee of 68 holds that the *halconazo* was a part of a policy of intensive repression across Mexico in the wake of the Tlatelolco massacre. The petition charges that the Falcons were a paramilitary group created, directed, financed and controlled by the state apparatus with the purpose of exterminating political dissidents among students.

Alvarez presented extensive evidence of Echeverría’s complicity in the *halconazo* to the Human Rights Commission. The Committee of 68 is demanding that the commission press the Mexican Supreme Court to reopen the case. It wants it heard this time without the president of the court, a former government official with ties to some of the accused and to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the ruling party during the dirty war decades.

Four years ago, President Fox created the Special Prosecutor for Past Social and Political Movements (FEMOSPP), a special commission to investigate Mexico’s repression, including the extra-judicial killings and disappearances of students, left-wing activists, peasants and reporters. Among the possible targets of this investigative body were Echeverría, Moya and high-ranking military officers.

Human rights groups have charged that by placing FEMOSPP under the authority of the attorney general’s office (*procuraduría general*) the Fox administration was making sure that there would be no serious investigation that would challenge Mexico’s military elite. Organizations of relatives of the missing have refused to collaborate with FEMOSPP because of what they consider to be its close ties to the military.

Defense Secretary Gerardo Clemente Vega summarized the

army’s position on the dirty war by stressing that its duty is to follow orders of a democratically elected president, “with loyalty and unconditionally,” implying that military officials bear no responsibility for the student massacres, disappearances and executions. In the past, Vega has demanded that the Mexican public adopt an attitude of “forgive and forget” toward the dirty war.

Fox’s election in 2000 displaced from the Defense Ministry those generals closest to the Institutional Revolutionary Party, and most closely linked with the dirty war, members of the “hard” or *duro* faction within the army. Since then, Fox’s relationship to the armed forces has changed; his increasing focus on the drug war has benefited the *duros*, men such as generals Enrique Cervantes and Alfredo Oropeza, who both played key roles during the dirty war. In March of this year, Fox met with US President Bush and agreed to set up *México Seguro* (Secure Mexico), a program that gives the Mexican military unprecedented powers of repression under the pretext that the war on drug trafficking requires the suspension of democratic rights.

The faction in the armed forces closest to the Fox administration is also threatened by an investigation into the dirty war. These are Catholic reactionaries who have also been linked to the Falcons and other paramilitary groups. Groups such as *El Yunque* (the anvil, which also calls itself “God’s Army”) and the Revolutionary Armed Action Command (CARA) bring together the most extreme Catholic elements. CARA was given free reign during the Echeverría administration. Many of those elements originated in the fascist MURO (*Movimiento Universitario de Renovadora Orientación*—University Movement for a Renewed Orientation), a fiercely anticommunist organization that provided shock troops for the Falcons and other paramilitary squads.

IHRC officials promised to respond to the appeal by the Committee of 68 in six months. The IHRC is an independent commission of the Organization of American States. Its decisions are recommendations to OAS members and are not binding on the governments involved.



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