

Specter of a police state:

Mexican torture videos reveal ties with US military contractors

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On July 1, videos surfaced on the Internet and Mexican television depicting police officers practicing torture techniques in the city of León, Guanajuato. The videos reveal ongoing ties between Mexican authorities and US military contractors, and an escalation of repressive measures against the Mexican working class, youth and peasantry. The tapes show an English-speaking private contractor training the officers, a chilling image that brought back memories of the “Dirty War” of the 1970’s and 80’s, when the Mexican government systematically hunted down and tortured left-wing students and peasants with the complicity and assistance of the United States.

The videos were first obtained by daily newspaper *El Herald de León*. In one of them, an officer can be seen forcing a subordinate to roll around in the dirt repeatedly to the point of exhaustion; then the advisor overseeing this pulls the man by his feet and drags him through a puddle of vomit. “This punishment works,” a trainee says to the camera. Clearly, this “punishment” is a form of psychological warfare designed to humiliate and demoralize the captive.

The police officers forced to withstand this brutal treatment belonged to an elite unit called Special Tactical Group (its Spanish initials are GET) of the León Municipal Police Force. The training took place in April 2006 and lasted for 12 days. León is in Guanajuato State.

A second video shows a blindfolded man having his head submerged in a hole filled with rats and feces. He gasps and moans for air, and has mineral water squirted up his nose. This technique is similar to “waterboarding”, whereby the victim undergoes near-drowning. The Mexican police are notorious for the use of this method.

In another incident, caught on tape and transmitted by the Televisa network, officers are seen jumping on the ribs of a suspect curled in the fetal position in the back of a pickup truck. León’s Police Chief Carlos Tornero has said the case, which occurred several months ago, was under investigation but that the officers involved had “disappeared.” Clearly, these are not isolated incidents.

León Mayor Vicente Guerrero Reynoso initially insisted that the training would continue. However, because of the public furor and under pressure from federal and state authorities, he suspended the program.

Tornero said an English-speaking advisor in the video was from a private US security company, but refused to give further details such as the name of the company, who contracted the company, or for that matter the man’s identity.

Two men have been identified from the videos by the Mexican

press: Jerry Wilson, a British national, and Gerardo Arrechea, a Cuban-Mexican. It is now known that both men are employed by Risk Incorporated, a military contractor based in Miami, Florida.

According to articles by Kristin Bricker, an independent journalist who lives in Mexico City (<http://mywordismyweapon.blogspot.com/>) Wilson is the man shown in one of the video’s dragging one of the torture “victims.” He also appears in a military assault training video distributed by Risk. Arrechea operates a martial arts school in Mexico City. In addition Arrechea is one of the directors of *Comando F4*, a right wing militia whose aim is to carry out armed attacks against the Cuban government. Arrechea is listed in the *Comando F4* website as a ‘Marine Captain’ and as a member of the F4 board of directors.

The US embassy in Mexico sought to distance itself from the videos. “The U.S. government was not involved in this training in any way. We have seen the press reports and are following it closely,” said an embassy spokesman who would not identify himself. For its part, Mexican police officials followed a rather predictable script in denouncing the media for releasing the tapes, then justifying the training as a means of withstanding torture under kidnapping scenarios.

The argument that the officers were being trained in how to resist torture if captured by drug cartels is bankrupt. John Kirby, a former federal prosecutor who helped indict the Arellano Felix cartel, has said that organized crime usually does not use the forms of torture that are associated with the Mexican police. “They’re going to cut off their fingers and take out their teeth,” he said. Kirby is among many, including Amnesty International, who believe these training exercises are not meant to train officers how to survive harsh interrogation, but rather how to torture. “The Mexican police, particularly on the federal side have really been trying to clean up their image and to see them going backwards is disturbing,” he said.

The embassy’s claim is disingenuous at best, given the history of the US government in the training of torturers throughout South and Central America by the CIA and at the infamous Army School of the Americas in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. It is much more likely that this work has now been “spun off” to Risk Incorporated and other private contractors.

The videotapes emerged on the day that the Bush Administration signed into effect the Mérida Initiative, also known as Plan Mexico. At a cost of \$1.5 billion, it is the largest US aid package designed to fight drug trafficking in Latin America since Plan Colombia in the year 2000 under Clinton. Plan Colombia in reality has more to do with eliminating the FARC guerrilla group’s control of key areas

containing the country's oil reserves than fighting cocaine trafficking.

Plan Mexico would provide training and equipment and "strengthening of military-to-military cooperation between the United States and Mexico." This will include providing riot gear, spy equipment and military aircraft, and the deployment of up to 50 US defense contractors, such as Risk Incorporated, Blackwater, and others.

Many human rights organizations rightly criticize the plan as a way of funneling money toward an apparatus that has a long history of murder, torture, and kidnapping. Some recent examples of Mexico's paramilitary abuses include the rape of dozens of female detainees by police in San Salvador Atenco, and the disappearances of dozens of teachers in the rebellious state of Oaxaca in 2006, as well as the murder there of North American journalist Brad Will by off-duty policemen.

One element of Plan Mexico that had come under fire from the Bush administration and its Mexican counterpart, the government of Felipe Calderón, is the so-called "human rights provision," which would have required the Secretary of State to certify that the Mexican military, police, and judicial system have instituted human rights and anti-corruption reforms, and would have mandated the use of the US judicial system as a model. The original Senate version of the bill would have obligated Mexican army units accused of rape and torture to be handed over to civilian courts.

This was seen as not only an affront to the Mexican military but also, supposedly, to the federal government, which would have been required to change the country's constitution. The Mexico City daily *La Jornada* pointed out that what is depicted in the videos already constitutes torture under Mexican law, and that it is in direct violation of Article 264 of Guanajuato's state penal code, which states: "the public servant who 'intentionally exercises violence against a person, be it in order to obtain information or constituting an illicit investigation method,' faces a punishment of 2-10 years in prison."

The bill also would bar police or army units that engage in torture or corruption from receiving US aid. How this would be enforced it is impossible to say. Republican Representative Brian P. Bilbray, whose district includes parts of San Diego, met with Mexican officials and gave the *Washington Post* the following ridiculous analogy: "There's got to be a degree of faith here. If a fireman is going to take your child out of a burning room, you don't stop him to ask for his credentials." It should be painfully clear that the human rights amendments are mere window-dressing to guarantee that the Mexican state can continue its repression unimpeded.

In tandem with the Mérida Initiative, on March 6th of this year, the Calderón administration approved so-called judicial reform legislation that allows police to detain suspects for up to 80 days without charges. Under the law, the power of judges to suspend such detentions or approve bail will be severely restricted for certain categories of crimes. The legislation was denounced by Human Rights Watch. In an open letter to President Calderón HRW indicated that "the 80-day limit is by far the longest in any Western Democracy."

These developments come in the context of an escalating drug war in Mexico that has claimed at least 1,500 lives this year alone and is responsible for 6,000 killings since 2006, when Calderón assumed office after a fraudulent election. In fact, there has been a concerted effort to bring the policies of Mexico closer into line with the Bush Administration. Much as with the "war on terror," Calderón has exploited the rising drug warfare to open the doors to police-state measures aimed at preempting social explosions such as the civic

strike in Oaxaca in 2006.

Despite 25,000 army troops being sent into the countryside against the drug traffickers, they have been unable to curb the level of violence in the country, or, for that matter, the level of corruption and incompetence in the police and military.

On Friday June 20, a police raid on News Divine, a popular discotheque for youth in a working class neighborhood in Mexico City, ended in the deaths of nine club-goers, aged 13 to 22, and three police officers as well. The victims died from suffocation when police triggered a stampede and then blocked the youth from leaving the crowded club. The military-style assault on some 300 unarmed youth inside the discotheque by scores of Mexican Police, using the dubious pretext of teen age alcohol consumption, appears to have been a tactical exercise gone wrong.

Since Calderón deployed the troops last year, there have been more than 634 cases of military abuse documented by the National Human Rights Commission. There have been more than 300 human rights claims filed in 2008, double the rate from last year. In Apatzingán, Michoacán State, about 80 people led a spontaneous protest against the local military headquarters two months ago, something that was unprecedented in recent years. Clearly, behind the military operations on the drug-traffickers lies a much larger war, to repress the Mexican masses.

Both US presidential candidates have weighed in on developments south of the border. Barack Obama and John McCain share largely similar policies on Latin America, which represent a continuation of the bipartisan strategy of US imperialism in the region. McCain was in Mexico on the day the torture videos were released, but had no comment on the matter. Instead, he met with Calderón for a press conference at the command center of the Mexican federal judicial police and vowed to boost aid to his regime. "I look forward to implementing the Mérida Initiative, and to work together to stem the flow of drugs from Colombia through Mexico and into the United States of America," McCain said. At a speech in Miami on May 23, Obama outlined his foreign policy for Latin America, making it clear that he also supports the Mérida Initiative and the Calderón government



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