

Scores of decapitated bodies found in Mexico

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In a brutal escalation of Mexico's drug war, scores of decapitated and mutilated bodies dumped in plastic bags were recovered along a highway outside of the industrial city of Monterrey in the northern state of Nuevo Leon.

The Mexican authorities put the number of dismembered corpses at 49, 43 men and six women, but other sources indicated that the death toll could rise to as many 68. Government officials warned that identification of the victims would be difficult, as all of the remains were headless and armless and in some cases had their legs severed as well.

Police said that none of the victims had been shot, leading to speculation that they could have been cut to pieces while still alive.

The grisly discovery followed an incident last week in which 18 mutilated bodies and severed heads were found in two mini-vans in Lake Chapala, a tourist spot in the western state of Jalisco. Earlier in the month, there was a similar mass killing in Nuevo Laredo, across the border from Texas, where 23 bodies were recovered, some decapitated and others hanging from a bridge.

Mexican authorities attributed the bloodbath to a struggle between rival drug trafficking organizations over control of markets and shipment routes to the United States, pitting the Zetas, a gang formed by former members of the Mexican military's special forces, against the Gulf Cartel backed by the Sinaloa Cartel.

Describing the killings as "senseless violence," the government of Mexico's right-wing President Felipe Calderon vowed to "act with all firmness and force to bring about justice and assure that there is no impunity."

The carnage, however, coming just six weeks before presidential elections set for July 1, only underscores the failure of Mexico's militarized "war on drugs" to

halt the spiraling violence in the country or significantly check the power of the drug cartels.

Imposed by Calderon with backing from Washington in December 2006, the drug war has seen some 46,000 troops deployed in Mexico and has cost the lives of more than 50,000 people, the overwhelming majority of them poor and working class. The focus of this "war" has not been to protect Mexicans from killings and violence, but to meet US demands for a crackdown on drug trafficking. It measures "success" in terms of amounts of drugs interdicted and the number of traffickers captured or killed. Meanwhile, the annual death toll has climbed to over 12,000.

There was speculation that the decapitated bodies found outside of Monterrey were those of migrant workers from Central America making the dangerous trek across Mexico in an attempt to reach and find work in the United States. The Mexican government estimates that approximately 150,000 such workers make this journey every year, while organizations that work with migrants believe that the real figure is closer to 400,000.

Authorities noted that there were no reports of disappearances in Nuevo Leon or neighboring states in recent days, and a police official suggested that tattoos found on some of the corpses suggested that the victims were Central Americans.

Preying on these workers has become a lucrative sideline of the drug cartels. They rob the migrants as well as kidnap them, using beatings and torture to extract the telephone numbers of relatives from whom they demand ransom on pain of death. In 2010, more than 20,000 migrants were reported kidnapped. So pervasive is this violence that, according to one estimate, eight out of ten Central American women crossing Mexico are raped before reaching the United States.

The Mexican government and the security forces play a major role in the persecution of immigrant workers.

While formally committed to protecting the rights of migrants, under the Merida Initiative, the military pact with the US, the Mexican government is pursuing a policy of repressing immigrants. In return, it receives military hardware and training from Washington. The security forces, moreover, frequently work in league with the drug cartels in preying on migrant workers.

A banner discovered with the remains in Nuevo Leon appeared to claim credit for the Zetas. On Monday, however, banners appeared in Ciudad Valles in the state of San Luis Potosi in which the Zetas appeared to disassociate themselves from the killings.

In 2010, the Zetas were blamed for a massacre of 72 undocumented workers, most of them Central American, in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, about 100 miles from the US border.

One theory is that these acts of so-called “senseless violence” are perpetrated by drug gangs with the calculated aim of drawing troops and police to areas where the horrific massacres have been discovered and thereby putting increased pressure on their rivals.

The practice of the cartels beheading their victims has been traced by those familiar with the gangs to the Zetas’ recruitment a decade ago of ex-members of the Guatemalan army’s Kaibiles, a special forces unit that was notorious for its brutality during the country’s civil war and used beheadings to intimidate the civilian population.

The day after the discovery of the headless corpses, the Nuevo Leon daily *El Mañana* published an editorial announcing that it would “abstain for as long as necessary from publishing any information arising from violent disputes.”

The editorial continued: “The editorial board and the management of this company have reached this lamentable decision, obliged by the circumstances that we all know and by the lack of conditions for the free exercise of journalism.” The newspaper’s offices had been shot up, for a second time, by a group of armed men last Friday.

Also on Sunday, reporter René Orta Salgado was found dead in the trunk of his car in the state of Morelos. His death brought to five the number of journalists killed over a period of just five days.

After five and a half years, over 50,000 dead and tens of billions of dollars in expenditures, Mexico’s “drug war” has produced no appreciable decline in the

amount of drugs reaching the United States—not to mention the amount of US guns getting into Mexico—or any decline in the power of the cartels. The combined actions of the Mexican government and the cartels, however, have meant a dramatic attack on the basic democratic rights of the Mexican people.



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