

Reports cite killings, disappearances and torture by Mexico's security forces

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26 May 2012

Annual human rights reports issued by both the US State Department and Amnesty International this week present a damning description of catastrophic conditions in Mexico resulting from the US-backed “drug war” that has claimed over 50,000 lives since the end of 2006.

While both attribute the greatest number of deaths to the organized crime cartels that control drug trafficking, the two reports also spell out the brutal repression carried out by the country's security forces, which frequently work in tandem with the drug cartels.

“Sometimes in the context of the fight against TCOs [Transnational Criminal Organizations], but also at times unrelated to it, security forces reportedly engaged in unlawful killings, forced disappearances, and instances of physical abuse and torture,” the State Department reported in its Mexico section of the “2011 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices” released on Thursday.

Among the cases of unlawful killings highlighted by the State Department report was that of Joaquin Figueroa Vasquez, whom evidence showed was subjected to “torture and a subsequent execution style killing” at the hands of state and federal security forces.

Also cited was the 2010 killing of two students at Monterrey Technological University by soldiers. While an investigation determined that guns were planted on their bodies to cover up the crime, no one has been arrested in the case. A similar case involved the murder of Martin and Bryan Almanza Salazar, ages five and nine in 2010. The two children were shot and killed on the road from Nuevo Laredo to Reynosa by troops, who then moved their bodies to give the impression that they had been caught in a crossfire between the army and a criminal gang.

The report states that “There were multiple reports of forced disappearances by the army, navy, and police.” The United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances found during a visit in March that the number

of disappearances had tripled last year compared to 2010.

One incident took place on March 26 of last year, when municipal police in Ciudad Juarez detained Juan Carlos Chavira, Dante Castillo, Raul Navarro, and Felix Vizcarra. “Family members of the victims found their abandoned pick-up truck on March 27 in a tunnel far from where they had been detained. On April 14, the dead bodies of the four missing men were discovered.” Three local police were arrested the following month, but as of the end 2011, none of them had been convicted of any crime.

The report also cited the cases of Raul Evangelista Alonso, dragged from his home by soldiers in Chilpancingo in the state of Guerrero in February of 2010, and Roberto Gonzalez Mosso, who was abducted in the same city a few days later by masked men who identified themselves as special organized crime investigators. By the end of 2011, neither individual had been seen again and there was no official information on their status.

Mexican law prohibits torture and the admission as evidence of confessions extracted under torture. Confessions are supposed to be taken only by prosecutors after a suspect has been examined by a doctor to confirm that they have not been subjected to torture. The State Department, however, cites the discovery by Mexico's National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) that in multiple cases there had been “falsification of medical records to cover up torture.” It quotes from a November 2011 Human Rights Watch report on security forces in four Mexican states commonly using methods of torture that include “beatings, asphyxiation with plastic bags, waterboarding, electric shocks, sexual torture, and death threats.”

The report describes conditions in Mexican prisons as “poor”, stating that prisoners are placed in solitary confinement for indefinite periods and are compelled “to bribe guards to obtain food, medicine and other necessities.” Overcrowding in many cases created “dire and at times life-threatening conditions for prisoners.” Conditions were said to be even worse for women prisoners, who in many cases are in prison

with their children, but given no extra food, and are subjected to sexual and physical abuse.

The deployment of the armed forces to conduct the drug war has led to a sharp increase in human rights abuses, the report acknowledges. It notes that the military has no “clear protocol for use of force and rules of engagement.” Complaints filed with SEMAR, the Secretariat of the Navy that oversees the Navy and Marines, which have played an increasingly prominent role in the repression, doubled between 2010 and 2011, from 198 to 495. Most cases are handled by a military justice system, whose “opaque” methods have “contributed to impunity.”

The report notes that the rampant violence associated with the drug war has had a significant effect in imposing self-censorship on Mexico’s press. At least nine journalists were killed last year, while others suffered disappearances, kidnappings, violence and death threats.

Also acknowledged is the fact that most Mexican workers are formally represented by state-recognized “protection unions” controlled by the employers, and that attempts to organize independent unions are repressed by state labor boards and thug violence as well as with mass firings of those involved.

The report gave rather short shrift to the horrors facing migrant workers crossing Mexico, citing a CNDH report that 11,330 of them were kidnapped between April and September 2010 as well as the government’s absurd claim that only 233 such cases had been registered.

The criticism of the Mexican government by the Amnesty International report was sharper. The government “did not take effective measures to prevent or investigate widespread grave human rights violations committed by the military and the police, including forced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, torture and arbitrary arrests,” the report said. It added, “Those responsible for the vast majority of crimes, including attacks on journalists, human rights defenders and women, were not held to account.”

Far more than the State Department, the Amnesty report stresses the collusion between the military, police and immigration officials, on the one hand, and the drug cartels on the other.

Moreover, it covers a significant element of the human rights situation in Mexico that the State Department report ignores altogether, writing, “The US government released further security related funding and other transfers to Mexico as part of the Merida Initiative, a three-year regional cooperation and security agreement ... despite the Mexican government’s

continued failure to meet human rights conditions.” It went on to cite “a bungled US operation to track weapons smuggled into Mexico”—known as Fast and Furious—which “highlighted the absence of effective mechanisms to prevent criminal gangs from bringing weapons into the country.”

In other words, the US is arming both sides in the drug war and providing military and financial support as well as advisers to the security forces as it carries out the atrocities detailed in both reports.

That this key information is omitted from the State Department report is hardly an aberration. US government policies and actions are excluded from any of the country reports, leading to absurd accounts of the situations in many nations. On Afghanistan, for example, the report reviews categories such as arbitrary killings and detentions, disappearances and torture without ever mentioning that the country is occupied by a US-led foreign force that is responsible for thousands of such actions.

The annual “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices” were introduced some 35 years ago under the Democratic administration of President Jimmy Carter, which initiated the turn toward increased use of human rights as a pretext for US intervention abroad. While they include enough information on the crimes and abuses carried out by US allies and client states to give them a veneer of objectivity, the reality is that these findings are simply ignored where it suits US imperialism’s interests, as in Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and elsewhere.

This convenient arrangement was described Thursday upon the release of the report as one of “principled engagement”, a new catch-phrase introduced under the Obama administration. Assistant Secretary of State Michael Posner explained: “We engage in the world and we recognize that there are a range of interests. We have security interests ... economic interests, political, diplomatic. But human rights is ... always going to be part of the discussion.” With some, however, the “discussion” involves air strikes and regime-change, while with others it is a matter of a wink and a nod.



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