

Independent panel reports on the disappearance of Mexican normalistas

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The Mexican federal government has officially shut down the investigation by the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI) into the September 2014 disappearance of 43 teaching students (normalistas), who are known as the Ayotzinapa 43.

The five members of the GIEI presented their findings Sunday in Mexico City to a packed audience that included relatives of the victims and members of human rights groups, some of whom shouted “don’t leave.”

The 608-page document constitutes a damning indictment of the federal government of President Enrique Peña Nieto, which is already popularly reviled for its role in the atrocity.

The GIEI was appointed by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (CIDH), an arm of the Organization of American States, to investigate the normalistas’ disappearance from Iguala, a town in the southern Mexican state of Guerrero, following a day of protests against federal cuts to education.

It charges that the government blocked key lines of investigation, mishandled evidence, used torture to extract “confessions” from alleged suspects and protected officials suspected of participating in the mass disappearance.

According to a study cited in the report, 80 percent of those who were arrested in connection with the case showed signs of having suffered physical violence at the hands of the authorities.

The panel uncovered evidence of federal police agents and even an agent of Mexican army intelligence having been present at the scenes in which the crime unfolded and participating in the operation to capture the students.

The document establishes that claims made after the massacre, in an attempt to justify the actions of the

police, that the students had planned to disrupt a political event organized by the wife of the mayor of Iguala were false. It likewise discounted allegations that the students had been linked to organized crime.

In their report, the experts concluded that different police forces and organized crime members closely coordinated their efforts in order to build a net preventing the departure of buses that had been commandeered by the normalistas in Iguala.

The report also said it was likely that different buses of students were taken to different locations. This contradicts what had been the official version of events put out by the former Mexican attorney general.

The experts charged that the Mexican government had erected “structural barriers” to their investigation, by stonewalling requests for evidence, replying to the panel’s inquiries with formal rather than substantive responses and a refusal to pursue lines of investigation.

The Mexican government promised full cooperation with the independent experts. But when some of their preliminary conclusions called into deep question the government’s version of events—that local Iguala police had turned the students over to a drug gang who then incinerated the students’ bodies in a dump in the neighboring town of Cocula—that cooperation ground to a halt.

As GIEI members told the *New York Times* in an interview published on Friday, in the end their efforts were met with harassment, stonewalling and intimidation by the federal government. The experts were denied access to critical witnesses and evidence.

Perhaps the most glaring obstruction by the government was its persistent refusal to allow the group to interview members of the local army garrison, the 27th military battalion. In its report today the GIEI said it had testimony that in response to pleas for help from

the students, soldiers said they could not intervene because “it is not our jurisdiction.”

Active federal involvement in the disappearance of the normalistas was recently confirmed. Testimony to the Mexican human rights office showed that federal police stationed in Iguala pointed their weapons at the students when they were taken from a bus and turned over by Iguala police to local police in yet another neighboring town, Huitzuco. The GIEI in their report today confirmed that a missing student made a call the night of the disappearance from the Huitzuco area.

GIEI member Ángela Buitrago, known for prosecuting military and government officials for human rights abuses in Colombia, told the *Times* that the greatest difficulty the experts faced was overcoming the government’s “pact of silence.” She explained that if the state or some state officials were involved, doors closed due to that complicity. The experts have concluded that the government will not permit the truth to come out.

The experts have characterized the federal government’s investigation as a secret procedure, based on declarations, likely coerced, of those to whom they decided to impute guilt, local drug gangs and police, that does not incorporate scientific proof.

The group of independent experts also faced orchestrated attacks by Mexican media. Business and right-wing papers such as *El Financiero* and *Milenio* smeared them, undoubtedly with the complicity of the government. For example, Buitrago was said to have a history of pressuring witnesses and fabricating testimony. Another GIEI member, Ana Paz y Paz, who prosecuted a former Guatemala dictator for war crimes, was alleged to have supported terrorists.

The report states that the group had been subjected to a “strong media campaign which included numerous attacks and attempts at personally disqualifying its members. These actions demonstrate that there exist certain sectors who are not interested in the truth, nor in a relationship of collaboration that would really help Mexico to confront the problems of violations of human rights in the Ayotzinapa case.”

In retaliation for the experts’ independence, the government for months pursued charges that Emilio Álvarez Icaza, the CIDH’s executive secretary who appointed them, had fraudulently spent money that was meant for the investigation.



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