

Investigation accuses Mexican federal police of summary executions in May 2015 raid

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In a blow to the Peña Nieto administration, Mexico's National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) released a report last week accusing the country's federal police of summarily executing 22 of 42 people killed after a raid on a suspected drug cartel last year. The killings were one of the worst instances of state violence in the decade since the Mexican government declared a "war on drugs" in 2006. During that period of time over 120,000 people have been murdered.

At least one police officer was killed during the May 2015 raid on a ranch where federal police ambushed suspected members of the Jalisco New Generation (JNG) cartel near the town of Tanhuato, in the state of Michoacán.

CNDH President Luis Raul Gonzalez Perez said, "The investigation confirmed facts that show grave human rights violations attributable to public servants of the federal police."

A senior Mexican police official, who declined to be named, told Reuters, "This is very serious, and a massive blow to the government."

Mexico's national security commissioner, Renato Sales, denied that police acted improperly and instead held his own press conference in which he said police responded legitimately to being fired upon. Sales said, "The use of weapons was necessary and proportional against the real and imminent and unlawful aggression. That is to say, in our minds they acted in legitimate defense."

The CNDH found that police lied about the incident, moved at least seven bodies and placed weapons on them to corroborate their story. The police also tortured two of the survivors and burned two bodies. The commission was unable to determine with certainty how another 15 victims died.

Margarito Romero, the father of one of the victims, said, "They should have been arrested, not murdered... even if some of them were members of the cartel, that is no

excuse."

The one-sided death toll led to suspicions that the government was lying about its role in the shootings. The CNDH questioned why the government carried out a raid on the ranch to begin with.

In the official version of events, police said they were responding to a truck, which fired upon them before going to the ranch. The government provided no evidence to support this story, but according to witness statements, 41 police officers did sneak onto the ranch as early as 6 am, an hour earlier than police reported.

The CNDH reported that after a federal police officer was shot, 54 more officers arrived with a Black Hawk helicopter. The helicopter fired some 4,000 rounds at the ranch, setting a nearby warehouse on fire and killing at least five people, according to the report.

Of the 42 people killed that day, thirteen were shot in the back, according to the CNDH. The report also stated that, "the federal police had approximately four hours to manipulate the scene" before investigators from the state attorney general's office arrived.

The CNDH concluded that most of the victims were asleep, since eighteen bodies were found barefoot and one just had on underwear. The government initially refused to hand over autopsy reports to the CNDH and when they did the attorney general's office described the reports as sloppy and incomplete.

At one point the morgue turned over the wrong body to a family. In three separate incidents, state prosecutors wrote up two different autopsies for the same person. Pictures of the scene showed bodies covered in blood and mud, with clean rifles laid suspiciously beside them.

According to a study by Mexico's National Autonomous University, police killed 17 people for every officer killed in gunfights in 2014. In shootouts involving the Mexican police between 2007 and 2013, the number of people killed for each person injured grew from 1.6 to

more than 20.

The May 2015 raid in Tanhuato was eerily similar to an incident in 2014 in which one officer was wounded and 22 suspects were killed after they surrendered in a warehouse in Tlatlaya, west of Mexico City. In the army's official story, the 22 suspects were killed after a firefight, but investigators from the Associated Press found evidence that suspects were lined up against the wall and shot.

Here too, the army argued self-defense and three soldiers were acquitted of murder charges. Three women who survived were tortured by state agents to force them to corroborate the army's version of events.

The CNDH also alleged that two survivors of the massacre in Tanhuato were forced to watch three executions and were also tortured. The police also made death threats against the survivors' families.

Investigators from Reuters news agency described the tin roof of a large barn where many men died as "riddled with hundreds of bullet holes", probably fired from a helicopter. The ranch itself was damaged by high-caliber ammunition that broke through thick walls and shattered glass. Families of the dead as well as forensic experts believe many were killed as they tried to escape.

The raid may have been payback for the cartel shooting down an army helicopter in the preceding weeks, killing six soldiers. One of the wives of the victims told the CNDH that she heard police bragging about how they caught the men by surprise. One police officer was believed to have said, "It was the easiest job we've ever done. We hit them like little birds, asleep in their nests."

Another wife of one of the victims told investigators that when she went to identify her husband, his toes had been cut off and his testicles burned. The police made fun of her and pointed to her pregnant belly saying, "That is the product of a delinquent."

Three men who were arrested told the CNDH that police officers beat them and threatened to kill them. A detainee told investigators, "One officer ordered (the police) not to kill any more detainees, because he had already reported there were survivors."

The CNDH's findings could not come at a more inopportune time for the Peña Nieto administration, whose poll numbers are at an all-time low. One survey this month registered a disapproval rating of 74 percent. Peña Nieto came into office in 2012 on a mandate to curb the drug violence and police corruption that has been endemic to Mexico for the last decade.

The Obama administration has provided the Mexican

government with billions in military hardware and training to prosecute its phony war on drugs. The Merida Initiative saw the US give Mexico \$2.5 billion to expand the war. Meanwhile, the ability of the world's largest banks, such as HSBC, to profit from laundering drug money remains unhindered. The unwillingness of the US Department of Justice to prosecute HSBC underscores the criminality and fraudulent character of "the war on drugs."

Not unlike its counterpart in the United States, the Mexican government's so-called "war on drugs" reveals itself as a war on the working class. While the Institutional Revolutionary Party government seeks on the one hand to act as the principal mediator of organized crime within its national boundaries—often brutally, as Tanhuato demonstrates—on the other it wields the police and military as a bludgeon against any expression of social anger by the working class. In June, at least eight people were shot dead by police after teachers demonstrated against education reforms in Oaxaca.

The latest atrocity follows the mass abduction and murder of 43 students from Ayotzinapa by the police, the worst massacre of students in the country since the 1968 bloodbath during the Olympics in Mexico City. The investigation of the killings of the students revealed a high level of collusion between the cartels, the political establishment and the military apparatus.

The escalation of police violence takes place against the backdrop of economic and social crisis. The Mexican economy shrank in the last quarter, with GDP falling by 0.3 percent from the first quarter, according to the National Statistics Institute. In this same period, industrial and agricultural output slipped 1.7 percent and 0.1 percent respectively. Michoacán, the state where the massacre occurred and one of the current hot spots of cartel violence, is the fifth poorest in the country, with a poverty rate of 59.2 percent. It is also has the fifth highest proportion of workers occupied in the informal sector, accounting for 7 out of 10 workers in the state.



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