

Mexican president calls criticism of military “inadmissible and unacceptable” in speech before 32,000 soldiers

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Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto fervently defended the Mexican military at a massive gathering of the Armed Forces on March 28. Peña Nieto’s appearance comes in the wake of criticisms about the military’s record of human rights abuses by politicians and civil organizations as the government prepares to legalize and expand its participation in domestic operations.

In his nationalistic tirade, the Mexican President condemned any and all criticism of the country’s military. “Whoever denigrates the labor of our Armed Forces degrades Mexico; whoever hurts them hurts Mexico; whoever discredits their work discredits Mexico,” Peña Nieto told his audience. He branded affronts against the military as near-treasonous acts that were “inadmissible and unacceptable,” claiming negative reports were targeting the military out of “ignorance or malice.”

Peña Nieto gave his speech to a massive audience of 32,000 active soldiers, pilots and marines and their families, as well as another 86,000 military personnel watching online. In total, the Mexican president reached more than one third of the country’s military forces. Highlighting the extraordinary political crisis facing the Mexican government, this event marked the first time in Mexican history that the president has addressed the Armed Forces at a national level.

Despite worsening economic indicators, Peña Nieto blatantly denied the country was undergoing a period of crisis: “Crisis is surely what may be present in their minds, but this is not what is happening.” In February, inflation reached its highest level in seven years, and the cost of living is drastically outpacing wages.

Speaking directly against accusations of human rights

abuses, the Mexican president censured those “who have pointed to and condemned members of our Armed Forces, who have said the work of our Armed Forces is to offend, to harm, to disrespect human rights, to massacre, as someone dared say.”

Peña Nieto’s address was a thinly veiled attack against Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), the leader and presidential candidate of the National Regeneration Movement (Morena). AMLO has made several criticisms of the military in the past months, putting the Mexican government on the defensive about the record of the Armed Forces during the decade-long “war on drugs.”

On February 9, the Mexican Army, Navy, and Air Force collaborated on a mission to target Juan Francisco Patrón Sánchez, the leader of the Beltrán Leyva cartel, in Tepic, Nayarit. Without warning, the Mexican Air Force opened fire against the alleged hideout of Patrón Sánchez using a helicopter-mounted machine gun, killing him and 12 other civilians in the process. The encounter was captured on video and has been shared widely on social media. A few days later, AMLO claimed minors were among the civilians killed in the military operation. “The policy of massacring and torturing, which has not worked since [former president Felipe] Calderón, has to change,” he declared.

AMLO made a second comment on March 13 while on tour in New York, when he was confronted by one of the fathers of the 43 Ayotzinapa students who disappeared in Iguala, Guerrero, in 2014. In the altercation, caught on video, the father questioned AMLO about his alleged close relationship with José Luis Abarca, the former mayor of Iguala. Both Abarca and the Armed Forces have been implicated in the

disappearance of the students.

“It is unjust, the grievance is with the State, not with us, the grievance is with the regime, the grievance has to be with Peña Nieto, with the Armed Forces, who intervened in this crime, not us,” said AMLO, quickly seeking to wash his hands of any role his former party, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), may have played in the students’ disappearance. AMLO then proceeded to call the father a “provocateur,” telling him to “shut up” so he could take a photograph with a supporter.

In both instances, government functionaries quickly demanded “proof” of AMLO’s allegations. For all its calls for “evidence,” an independent panel found the Mexican government obstructed investigations of the disappearance of the students, including blocking key lines of investigation, stonewalling requests for evidence, and using torture to extract “confessions” from alleged suspects.

As demonstrated by AMLO’s response to the missing student’s father, he is not the least bit interested in seeking the truth about who played a role in the students’ disappearance. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, AMLO is a tried and tested politician who is seeking to channel the explosive social conditions in Mexico into policies that benefit the Mexican middle class. His proposals range from toothless programs to apply reactionary policies dressed in populism and Mexican nationalism that leave intact capitalist social relations—the source of mounting misery for workers and peasants in Mexico and worldwide.

AMLO quickly backtracked his remarks, proclaiming himself a defender of the Army: “The Army is the people in uniform. They are the sons of peasants, of workers who support us. The only difference is that we are not going to use force to tackle social problems. We are not going to repress the people in the Army.” AMLO’s comments are meant to obscure the role of the military as the first line of defense for the ruling elite, seeking to promote illusions the Armed Forces can be “reformed” at a time when the government is militarizing the country to prepare for future social unrest.

This nationalistic defense of the military by both Peña Nieto and AMLO takes place in the context of a significant push by the Mexican government to pass the

Interior Security Law, which would grant the military the legal framework to permanently conduct domestic operations. The Mexican Chamber of Deputies is scheduled to vote on the law before the end of the legislative period on April 30, after which it would have to declare an extraordinary session to pass the law or wait until the next legislative period in September. Given the country’s explosive political situation, such a delay is unacceptable to the Mexican ruling class.



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