Ten dead in confrontation between civilians and the military in Puebla, Mexico

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A violent encounter between the military and alleged oil thieves left 10 dead and 12 wounded in the central Mexican state of Puebla last Wednesday. The following day, over 500 people took control of a major highway to demand the release of 13 individuals detained the previous day.

According to statements by the Secretary of Defense (Sedena), at approximately 8 p.m. on May 3 a local military unit was alerted to plans to steal oil from the state-owned oil company Pemex (Petróleos Mexicanos) in the town of Palmarito, Puebla. When they arrived at the scene, the ministry claims, the army was attacked by a group using women and children as "human shields." Sedena claims another encounter took place at 10 p.m., when five vans drove by a stationed police car and opened fire against members of the armed forces. The clash left 10 dead, including six alleged oil thieves and four members of the military. One woman and one minor were among the dead.

This official story stands in sharp contradiction to the testimony of local townspeople. A woman designated as spokesperson for the town affirmed clashes began at around 5:30 p.m. when members of the military shot at peasants who were running away from a beehive, confusing them for *huachicoleros* (the name given to those who illegally siphon fuel from pipelines).

The military then violently entered Palmerito and opened fire against the population, while "taking men, women and children" prisoner. Local townspeople affirm one woman was killed on her way to buy tortillas and three minors were detained by the authorities.

The following morning, about 500 people blocked a highway between Puebla and Veracruz in protest against the military assault, carrying signs reading "Palmerito is in mourning. We want peace and tranquility" and "We want the people who were taken from us." The protesters erected barricades and lit several tires on fire, producing smoke that could be seen for several kilometers. They issued demands for the armed forces to leave the area, and for the release of those who had been detained in connection to the prior day's events, as well as for the return of the bodies of the six dead civilians. The protesters blocked the highway for five hours, after which they were forcefully dispersed by over 1,000 state police using tear gas.

Puebla is the third poorest state in Mexico, with two-thirds of its population, or 3.5 million people, living below the poverty line. According to the Secretariat of Social Development (Sedesol), over 45 percent of the population of Palmerito has not completed a primary education, and eight out of 10 people are living in poverty, including one out of four in extreme poverty.

Palmerito is in an area of high activity by *huachicoleros* known as the Red Triangle (Triángulo Rojo), which includes six Puebla municipalities, through which 40 percent of all oil that reaches Mexico City passes each day. According to Pemex, there have been over 17,000 cases of oil siphoning from January 2014 to February of this year, which has cost the government about 160 million pesos (about US$8.4 million). Pemex claims over 2,800 illegal oil taps occurred in the state of Puebla during this period, the highest in the country.

Pemex workers and local police are often complicit in the illegal oil tapping operations. Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, an associate professor at the University of Texas, told the newspaper *Periódico Central*: "The illegal tapping cannot be perpetrated by drug traffickers alone. There must be people who worked or are working for Pemex. And with the express agreement of

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management, this is not a new development, but something that has been documented since [former Mexican president] Vicente Fox." In a recent case, two out of the four *huachicoleros* detained by federal police on April 6 in Guanajuato were Pemex workers, while seven police were detained in Puebla last September for collaborating with the *huachicoleros* .

Andres Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), who is currently leading the polls for the 2018 Mexican presidential elections, spoke about the events a few days later and continued to claim he was against corruption in Mexico. "The *huachicolero* is not just about siphoning the pipes. They steal gasoline from the refineries, where there are pipes, and this has to do with the authorities. They are a *huachicol*, but a white-collar *huachicol*."

On May 7, AMLO issued a call for the "left parties" in Mexico—including the Party of Democratic Revolution (PRD), the Workers Party (PT) and the Citizen's Movement— to join forces with his party, Morena (Movement of National Regeneration), against the "corrupt parties." For all his posturing as an enemy of the "mafia in power," he neglected to mention that Eva Cadena, a Morena candidate in the state of Veracruz, was recently captured on video receiving over one million pesos (over US$52,000) from unreported sources on three separate encounters, allegedly to finance AMLO's campaign and as payment for pushing a favorable law in the local congress. As for the PRD, it was recently revealed that its national president owns a $1 million luxury apartment in Miami.

While the Mexican government quickly mobilized to defend Pemex's profits, its citizens continue to bear the cost of the 20 percent gas hike in January known as the *gasolinazo*. The price of a basic basket of goods increased by 8 percent in the month of April, and families in the lowest two deciles of earners now allocate over 80 percent of their income to food alone, compared to 10 percent for the wealthiest Mexicans. The unaffordability of gasoline sets the stage for the *huachicoleros* to sell it at cheaper prices on the illegal market while bringing in additional income for their impoverished communities.

The Mexican ruling class responded to the events in Palmerito by calling for the further militarization of the country. Enrique Ochoa Reza, the leader of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), quickly renewed calls for declaring an extraordinary session of the Chamber of Deputies to pass the Interior Security Law.

Among the events commemorating the 1862 Battle of Puebla, popularly known as *cinco de mayo*, Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto spoke before the armed forces alongside the secretary of defense, the secretary of the marines, and the secretary of finance. He restated his commitment to "support them, protect them, and see that their dignity and rights are respected at all times." Meanwhile, the governor of Puebla announced plans to deploy another two thousand military personnel, two helicopters, and armored vehicles to the state.

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