

Remains of one of Mexico's missing Ayotzinapa 43 students identified

Rafael Azul, Don Knowland
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Mexico's attorney general announced July 7 that human remains found at Barranca Carnicería, a ravine in the town of Cocula, Guerrero state, were identified in June by Vienna's Innsbruck University as belonging to Christian Adolfo Rodríguez Telumbre. The identification was confirmed by an independent team of Argentine forensic anthropologists.

Nearly six years ago, on the night of September 26–27, 2014, 57 students from a teaching college in Ayotzinapa were seized after a confrontation with the Iguala police and the Mexican Army. In the confrontation, six others were killed and 25 were injured. Of those that were abducted, 43 went missing.

Christian was 19 years old at the time of his disappearance. Like many of his fellow students, he had opted for the Ayotzinapa teachers college because it was affordable, given his family's meager resources. Most school graduates go on to teach in schools in poor rural areas.

On that fateful day in September 2014, Christian had joined a group of 100 Ayotzinapa students who were on their way to Mexico City to commemorate the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre of students and civilians by Mexican military and security forces. Fifty-seven student teachers (*normalistas*) were arrested in the city of Iguala, after commandeering some buses for the journey, a not uncommon practice of students traveling to demonstrations. Christian was one of the 43 who never returned.

No one was ever held accountable for killing of hundreds at Tlatelolco. In June 1971, 120 students were killed during a demonstration, also in Mexico City. Both of these events were part of the so-called Dirty War carried out by the Mexican government against workers and youth in the 1970s. That repression was also directed at rural *normalista* schools.

The Iguala events had not been the first attack on Ayotzinapa students. In May 2013, Guerrero state police assaulted Ayotzinapa students collecting funds for a festival. Twenty-six were arrested and severely beaten. In December 2011, three Ayotzinapa students were shot and killed during a demonstration demanding a meeting with the Guerrero governor. Needless to say, those responsible for these and other acts of repression were never punished in any way.

The disappearance of the Ayotzinapa 43 triggered mass protests throughout Mexico. Tens of thousands marched in Mexico City less than two weeks after the abduction and killings. Thousands of students and teachers protested across southern Mexico, including 50,000 in Chilpancingo, the state capital of Guerrero.

In an attempt at damage control, in January 2015 the government of President Enrique Peña Nieto announced that the 43 students had been killed at the hands of a local criminal drug cartel, Guerreros Unidos, that their bodies had been burned at a garbage dump and their remains placed in plastic bags and thrown into the San Juan River in Cocula, a town near Iguala.

Federal authorities insisted that their findings were not to be doubted, calling them the “historical truth,” a phrase uttered by then attorney general Jesús Murillo Karam. With this incantation, the investigation of the disappearance of the Ayotzinapa 43 was effectively frozen, and the role of the military that night left unprobed.

In reality, this “historical truth” covered up the role of the Mexican Army and security forces. The government of Peña Nieto categorically denied that the armed forces had played any role in the violence against the *normalistas* that night, and specifically denied that the Army's 27th and 41st infantry battalions, which share a military base in Iguala, were

involved.

Far from being the result of a supposedly “botched investigation,” as President Andres Manuel López Obrador suggested when he convened a “truth commission” upon taking office in December 2018, the so-called “historical truth” was a full blown cover-up, one subscribed to by all three of the main parties represented in the Mexican legislature, the ruling PRI, the center “left” PRD, and the right-wing PAN.

According to a report published on July 11, 2020 in the Mexico City journal *Proceso*, army personnel were in fact heavily involved. They transported the students to the Iguala infantry battalion headquarters, interrogated them, and then handed them over to the Guerreros Unidos drug cartel to dispose of. Shortly thereafter, cartel members killed the students and dipped their bodies in vats of acid, before bagging and burning their remains.

Proceso’s report bases itself on new testimony, including that of members of the drug cartel, detailing longstanding links between the cartel, the Iguala police and the armed forces in Guerrero, which were all complicit in the transportation of drugs, arms and money.

In a meeting with parents of the 43 students, President López Obrador declared that the identification of the remains of Christian Alfonso Rodriguez marked the “beginning of a new and authentic investigation,” according to spokespersons for the parents. An attorney for the parents told the press that López Obrador had committed himself to continue the investigation until what happened to all the victims was defined and *all those responsible* are apprehended.

Many parents rightly remain skeptical of these claims. López Obrador has increasingly relied heavily on the military, expanding its role in dealing with criminal activity and so-called security threats, including by creating a National Guard.

López Obrador has used the military and National Guard to repress migrants, independent struggles by industrial workers, and protesting teachers. It can be ruled out that he will cross his military chiefs, who almost certainly directed the prior coverup.

Less than a month ago, López Obrador’s car was surrounded by protesters in the port city of Veracruz, where he had gone to speak at a military base. The

protesters demanded that the government resolve the issue of the fate of the 43 *normalistas*, and that he step out of his vehicle to speak to them. “Help bring them home” said one of the banners.

López Obrador refused to talk to the protesters, citing the need for “a healthy distance” due to the coronavirus pandemic, a consideration he has repeatedly dismissed and ignored. According to the *Mazatlán Post* newspaper, “a woman protesting said: ‘You meet with el Chapo’s mother, bastard, but not with us,’ referring to López Obrador’s shaking hands with the mother of imprisoned drug lord Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzman in March while visiting the state of Sinaloa.

Vidulfo Rosales, attorney for the parents, insisted that in addition to catching all those responsible for the disappearance of the 43 students, all those who collaborated in hiding the truth must be held accountable. If taken literally, that would include the prior president and attorney general, as well as the highest echelons of the military.

Meanwhile more fragments of possible body parts have been sent to the University of Innsbruck for further testing.



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