Mexico's "Truth Commission" on 43 disappeared Ayotzinapa students—what it does and does not reveal

Don Knowland
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On August 18, to considerable fanfare, the Mexican government released the report of its "Truth Commission" concerning the disappearance of 43 Ayotzinapa rural teaching students in the southern state of Guerrero in September 2014.

The report concedes that the persecution and disappearance of the Ayotzinapa 43 was a "state crime," involving local officials and military units, and that the government of then President Enrique Peña Nieto pursued a deliberate policy of concealment of the crime and obstruction of justice.

But the report fails to address the roles in the cover-up of the Mexican Secretariat of National Defense, the military brass, and the national intelligence agency, then known as CISEN.

On September 26, 2014, the students left Ayotzinapa to take part in a demonstration in Mexico City to commemorate the October 2, 1968 massacre of students by military and federal police and paramilitary units. Their progress was monitored by federal and state police, and an informant infiltrated into their school by the military was along for the journey.

When the students reached the City of Iguala, they borrowed a local bus for the rest of their journey, a common occurrence. It appears the bus had drugs of a local gang on it, the Guerreros Unidos. Municipal police rounded up and arrested the students. This much is agreed upon.

A handful of the students were killed in the city, and the rest were handed by police over to the gang, who burned their bodies at a landfill site near the neighboring town of Cocula. At least this was the version of events promoted by the Peña Nieto government, which it dubbed the "historical truth."

In fact, the investigation at the time was plagued by irregularities and human rights violations. Instead of seeking the truth, the federal investigation sought to conceal it, and particularly the role of the military and federal police in these events.

An Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI) was appointed by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2015, which questioned the official version of events from its inception, and presented exhaustive criticisms of the investigations carried out. Based on forensic analysis, the GIEI flatly rejected the theory that the students had been cremated, on the grounds that it was impossible in the circumstances described by the Mexican authorities.

The GIEI's efforts in 2015 and 2016 also revealed the Mexican government's falsification of records, destruction of evidence, and systematic use of torture against detainees and suspects throughout the official investigation.

For years, the parents of the Ayotzinapa 43 pursued the truth, while holding onto slim hopes that some of the students might still be alive. They staged continuous marches and protests, and the Mexican population overall supported their quest for justice.

Shortly after he came into office in December 2018, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, known as AMLO, announced the formation of the "Commission for Truth and Access to Justice." A special unit in the federal Attorney General's Office was set up to manage the investigation.

The Truth Commission proceeded at a tortoise pace over the next three and a half years, reflecting continued resistance in the higher echelons of the state. This pace and lack of results further frustrated the Ayotzinapa parents, extending their grief.

In March 2022, the GIEI presented its third report on the case, exposing in detail the involvement of high-level government officials and institutions in the cover-up. Its revelations included documentation of the Mexican military's infiltration and surveillance of the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers College before, during and after the events in Iguala in September of 2014, as well as the manipulation of the alleged Cocula crime scene by members of the Mexican Navy, the branch of the military popularly considered as the

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least corrupt in Mexico.

The GIEI concluded that the military and police collaborated with gangs to kidnap and massacre the students; that "all information was obtained through torture" by the Ministry of Defense; and that the arrest warrants issued were "falsified." It also found that 20 key witnesses, including several suspects, had been murdered.

Finally, this month, AMLO's government belatedly released the report of its Truth Commission. The report conceded that the disappearance of 43 Ayotzinapa teacher training students was in fact a "state crime," and its investigation was a deliberate cover-up.

Since the report was released, other grisly facts have emerged. For example, Human Rights Undersecretary Alejandro Encinas let slip that six of the 43 college students "disappeared" in 2014 were kept alive in a warehouse for days and then turned over to the local army commander, Col. José Rodriguez Pérez, who ordered them killed.

On August 19, at the request of the federal Attorney General, an arrest warrant was issued against the former federal Public Prosecutor, Jesus Murillo Karam, considered the architect of the initial investigation and its "Historical Truth" falsification.

Warrants were also requested and issued against 20 local military commanders and military personnel from the 27th and 41st Battalions in the city of Iguala, as well as five administrative and judicial officials from the state of Guerrero; 26 police officials from the nearby municipality of Huitzuco; six from Iguala and one from Cocula; plus 11 state police officials from Guerrero and 14 members of the criminal group Guerreros Unidos.

Apart from Murrillo Karam, a sacrificial lamb of sorts, the search warrants extend only to local officials and officers.

Despite subsequently calling for "patience," AMLO declared that the findings of the commission don't even "merit an investigation" of Peña Nieto himself. Moreover, no action has been hinted at against the head of security of the Mexico City government controlled by AMLO's Morena party, Omar Harfuch. Implicated in the prosecution hearing against Karam for participating in the October 7, 2014 meeting with Karam and other top officials where the "historical truth" was born, Harfuch was also head of the Federal Police in Guerrero during the Ayotzinapa events.

Likewise, conspicuously absent from any scrutiny or prosecution are those who sat at the highest levels of the defense ministry, the military chiefs, and in the national intelligence agency. It would beggar belief to conclude that these layers were not fully informed of the true course of events in 2014, and particularly as to the role of the local military units in the murder of the students. At minimum, they covered up, but they retain impunity.

Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos, who was the Secretary of Defense under Peña Nieto, that is, during the time of the Ayotzinapa killings and cover-up, is one of them. In 2005-2007, Cienfuegos commanded the IXth Military Region, headquartered in Acapulco, Guerrero. He allegedly protected the Sinaloa Cartel (headed by "Chapo" Guzman) and the related Beltrán-Leyva Cartel (headed by Guzman's cousins), which controlled the Guerrero region at the time.

In November 2020, AMLO pressured the US to release Cienfuegos, despite clear evidence that he was being paid to protect and directly facilitate drug shipments by the H-2 cartel, a Beltran-Leyva offshoot. Once the Trump administration dropped the charges and returned Cienfuegos to Mexico, AMLO exonerated him.

More generally, these layers are protected because AMLO's rule increasingly rests upon the Mexican military. He created a militarized National Guard which he now seeks to move from the Public Security Ministry to the Defense Ministry. And he is seeking to extend the domestic deployment of the Army and Navy beyond the 2024 limit that he decreed in 2020.

These moves reveal an authoritarian course on AMLO's part, and ultimately his reliance on the military to suppress any threat of working class unrest.

Ayotzinapa is a powerful symbol of state-sponsored criminality in Mexico, and a decades-long history of its government's suppression of popular resistance to class oppression.

It reveals the injustice and impunity emblematic of the pervasive problem of forced disappearances that occur daily throughout the country, which exceeded 100,000 people under Peña Nieto, and have only increased under López Obrador.

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