

Mexico's president AMLO shields military's complicity in disappearance of Ayotzinapa students

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September 27 marked nine years since the disappearance of 43 rural teaching students (normalistas) from the town of Ayotzinapa in the southern Mexican state of Guerrero.

There remains little doubt that the normalistas, who had commandeered three buses in the City of Iguala in order to attend a protest in Mexico City, were killed through the coordinated actions of a local narcotics gang, the Guerreros Unidos, local, state and federal police, and the Mexican military. They were likely killed because the buses had some of the gang's narcotics on them.

At the outset, the Mexican Attorney General (PGR) under former Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto, Jesús Murillo Karam, and his office, concocted a coverup story to the effect that the students had been killed by the local gang members, their remains burned at a local garbage dump, and then tossed into an adjoining river.

This falsification, which, inverting reality, became known as the "historical truth," was aimed at hiding the role of the police and security forces involved, and especially that of the Army.

The National Defense Ministry (Sedena) maneuvered from the outset to try to buttress the "historical truth," and shield the Iguala infantry battalions and their officers, along with Sedena itself. For example, an attempt was made to conjure up a link between the students and organized crime.

On September 27, 2015, retired Gen. Humberto Guillermo Aguilar sent an email to then-Secretary of National Defense Salvador Cienfuegos recommending that he hire experts to support the garbage dump hypothesis. "The 'historical truth' may not be accepted, but it cannot be changed," Cienfuegos wrote a Sedena document leaked by the Guacamaya hacking group.

As further shown by emails from the Army leaked by the Guacamaya group, in May 2017 Sedena drew up an enemies list of "actors averse to the official version" of the Ayotzinapa case. Human rights organizations, and prominent journalists, academics and legislators figured prominently in that document. Mexico's current president, the pseudo-left populist Andre Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), was included, because he had demanded that the participation of the Army in the crime be investigated, and that the soldiers involved be punished.

The military's attempted coverup did not succeed. The major role in debunking the "historical truth" was played by the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI), made up of four experts sent by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to investigate the Ayotzinapa case, and the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team.

When AMLO took office in late December 2018, he trumpeted that his first order of business was forming a "Presidential Commission for Truth and Access to Justice" (Covaj), to be led by his Undersecretary of Human Rights, Alejandro Encinas. He claimed it would get to the bottom of this

atrocity, come what may. AMLO ordered that "all available information" be provided to the investigation.

Things did not exactly work out that way.

The Commission proceeded at a snail's pace, prolonging the anguish of the families of the 43, and effectively snubbing them.

In 2019, the PGR ordered the creation of the Special Investigation and Litigation Unit for the Ayotzinapa Case (UEILCA), and a special prosecutor was appointed. A select few were then served up to take the rap.

On August 19, 2022, Murillo Karam and his right-hand man Tomas Zerón, now a fugitive from justice, were charged and arrested for the crimes of torturing gang witnesses to force them to lie, the forced disappearance of the normalistas, and acting against the administration of justice.

At that time warrants were also requested and issued against 20 local military commanders and military personnel from the 27th and 41st infantry battalions in the city of Iguala, including colonels Rafael Hernández Nieto and José Rodríguez; the latter subsequently promoted to the rank of general. Warrants were also issued as to five administrative and judicial officials from the state of Guerrero; 26 police officials from the nearby municipality of Huitzoco; six from Iguala and one from nearby Cocula; plus 11 state police officials from Guerrero and 14 members of the Guerreros Unidos gang.

Conspicuously absent from any scrutiny or prosecution were those who sat at the highest levels of the defense ministry, the military chiefs, or 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 the bare minimum, they covered up, but they retained impunity.

At that same time, on August 18, 2022, Alejandro Encinas issued, to considerable fanfare, the report of the "Truth Commission." The report conceded 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 Peña Nieto had pursued a deliberate policy of concealment of the crime and obstruction of justice.

But the Covaj report failed to address the roles played in the coverup by Sedena, the military brass, and the national intelligence agency, then known as CISEN.

At that time the Attorney General's Office (FGR) also charged Rodríguez Pérez with ordering the killing of some of the 43 normalistas.

However, the judge assigned to the case at that time declined to issue a warrant against the general on that charge, instead limiting the charge to engaging in organized crime, that is, for collaborating with the Guerreros Unidos gang.

Inexplicably, the FGR itself began to dismantle its special unit in August 2022. It then removed the investigative police it had set aside for that unit, canceled most of the warrants, and otherwise interfered with the work of the special prosecutor, Omar Gómez Trejo. In response Gómez Trejo resigned.

According to members of the GIEI, the FGR took this action because the special unit would have begun to investigate officials from the FGR itself, who allegedly participated in acts of torture to fabricate the “historical truth.”

The GIEI warned that Trejo’s resignation put the future of the Ayotzinapa case at risk, and could delay its resolution for at least three to five years.

The GIEI further emphasized the loss of critical knowledge with the departure of Trejo, while also fearing that he would be the subject of reprisals, such as an internal affairs investigation for focusing on military personnel.

It is now unclear how many of the subjects of the warrants are currently in custody. But in June of this year, 16 warrants were reactivated, including warrants for Hernández Nieto and Rodríguez Pérez. Hernández Nieto remains in custody.

In late July of this year the GIEI ended its investigation and issued a final report. The GIEI had managed to obtain cell tracking data of key figures such as Rodríguez Pérez, and recordings of calls of military and other security personnel involved in the disappearance of the normalistas. The GIEI however was unable to determine the locations of the remains of the deceased, since they had been divided into groups and disposed of at different locations by gang members.

In its final report, the GIEI emphasized the resistance of the Mexican state, and most of all the Army, but including the Navy and the federal intelligence agency, to providing all documentation and evidence bearing on the Ayotzinapa events.

In its reports, the GIEI concluded that the Navy manipulated the scene at the landfill, and that Sedena ‘obtained all information through torture’ and falsified arrest warrants. Moreover, at least 26 witnesses of the Iguala case have died or been killed.

General Cienfuegos, the Secretary of Defense under Peña Nieto, that is, during the time of the Ayotzinapa killings and coverup, had played a key role in this coverup.

Early on in the Ayotzinapa investigation Cienfuegos refused to permit the GIEI access to troops that had been on the scene in Iguala, saying he would not permit his soldiers “to be treated like criminals.” Cienfuegos in a television interview on October 15, 2015 said: “We had nothing to do with it. Why do they want to enter the military installations? The Attorney General’s Office did its investigation and did not find any minimal indication of our participation in something illegal.” These were boldfaced lies.

Cienfuegos himself had criminal ties to narco in Guerrero. In 2005-2007 he commanded the IXth Military 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. And clear evidence existed that he was being paid to protect and directly facilitate drug shipments by the H-2 cartel, a Beltrán-Leyva offshoot.

General Cienfuegos was eventually seized at an airport in the U.S. and held and investigated by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency for drug trafficking and money laundering, protecting drug smuggling corridors and alerting cartel bosses to U.S. enforcement actions. In November 2020, AMLO pressured the U.S. to release Cienfuegos, despite strong evidence against him.

In 2021, through then Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard, AMLO negotiated the return of Cienfuegos. The Trump administration dropped

the charges and returned Cienfuegos to Mexico so that, as a joint U.S.-Mexico statement explained, “he may be investigated and, if appropriate, charged under Mexican law.”

Neither occurred. AMLO falsely claimed that Cienfuegos had been expressly exonerated by the FGR, now headed by AMLO’s current PGR Alejandro Gertz Manero. Cienfuegos was a free man. A trial had to be avoided at all costs. It could have implicated other military brass still on duty and exposed the extent of corruption in the armed forces.

As a candidate for president AMLO had slammed Mexico’s armed forces and the “mafia of power” that he said controlled them. He accused soldiers of human rights abuses in the country’s bloody drug war and at that time publicly chastised Cienfuegos.

AMLO claimed only last year that the military’s official policy under previous administrations was to “kill them all,” i.e. extrajudicial executions, while he has since minimized or outright lied about numerous reports of extrajudicial executions, torture and spying against journalists and human rights advocates by the military under his administration.

He reneged on his campaign to end the military’s involvement in fighting drug trafficking, while vastly expanding the role of the armed forces in other civilian matters.

AMLO created a National Guard, which now has over 100,000 troops, and gave the military responsibility for recruiting, training and funding the new force. The militarized National Guard has in large part replaced the civilian federal police. Its presence is now ubiquitous throughout the country.

The president also assigned the military a contract to build a new international airport outside Mexico City, and the military is building part of a multibillion-dollar tourist train on the Caribbean coast. These projects give the armed forces more independent streams of revenue, opportunities for corruption, and even greater autonomy.

The military has taken over ports, airports and customs. It troops play the leading role in oppressing migrants passing through Mexico as they seek to reach the United States. Its budget has expanded by double digits during AMLO’s presidency.

In sum, AMLO increasingly relies on the Mexican military to rule. These moves reveal an increasingly authoritarian course on AMLO’s part, and ultimately his reliance on the military to suppress any threat of working class unrest, and maintain oligarchic rule in Mexico.

The extent of AMLO’s embrace of the military was vividly illustrated in April when he held a press conference with Gen. Luis Cresencio Sandoval González, Mexico’s current secretary of defense, the supreme commander of the armed forces. As the GIEI was beginning to publicly lay out the basis for its final report on Ayotzinapa, the two belittled its investigation.

Cresencio Sandoval warned that it would be “reckless” to hold the Army responsible for the disappearance of the normalistas. “I have an obligation,” he insisted, “to take care of the prestige of the Army”

The President chimed in, absurdly describing as “conjecture” the statement by the members of GIEI that the Army could hide information on the case. AMLO insisted that “everything the Defense Secretariat has was delivered,” a demonstrably risible claim.

López Obrador went on to attack the advisers and lawyers of the relatives of the normalistas, saying he did not trust them. He made clear where his sympathies lie.

Even more graphically illustrating the integration of the regime of AMLO and his Morena party with Mexico’s military and security forces is the peculiar case of Omar García Harfuch, who was the head of the Federal Police in Guerrero state when the normalistas were disappeared.

Mexico City’s mayor, Claudia Sheinbaum, who is now the official candidate for Mexican president of AMLO’s Morena party in the upcoming 2024 election, appointed García Harfuch in 2019 as head of the Investigative Police of Mexico City’s now defunct Attorney General’s

Office, as well as intelligence coordinator of her Security cabinet. With Sheinbaum vacating the mayor's office to run for president, García Harfuch is running as Morena's candidate for mayor to replace her.

Definitive documentation and cell phone records now place García Harfuch at a critical meeting in Iguala a week after the normalistas were disappeared, where the "historical truth" was initially concocted. It also appears that the head of the Guerreros Unidos gang had Harfuch's contact information in his phone book. Yet neither AMLO nor Sheinbaum have called Harfuch and his candidacy for Mexico City mayor into the slightest question.



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