

Twelve years since disappearance of Ayotzinapa students: the cover-up continues

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On September 26, 2014, 43 teaching students (*normalistas*) from the Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Teachers College in Ayotzinapa, in the southern Pacific Coast state of Guerrero, were attacked by police and forcibly disappeared in the city of Iguala. Six people were killed that night, among them three other students. Twelve years later, the remains of only three of the 43 have been identified.

On Monday, September 28, the administration of President Claudia Sheinbaum delivered a “new report” that does little to advance the prosecution of those responsible. If anything, it amounts to a political operation to close off, once and for all, the trail that leads in particular to the military.

The families of the *normalistas* were not even invited to the presentation. And the Army continues to defy a February 19, 2026 federal court order to release some 850 pages (*folios*) of intelligence records on the atrocity, which the families have long demanded.

Tens of thousands of parents, relatives and supporters marched on Saturday, September 26, from the Angel of Independence to Mexico City’s Zócalo (main plaza) to protest the federal government’s continuing failure to release all the evidence in this horrific crime.

This atrocity, and its initial cover-up, occurred under President Enrique Peña Nieto of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). His government claimed that local police had handed the students over to a gang, which killed them and burned their bodies at a landfill near the neighboring town of Cocula. It dubbed this version the “historical truth.”

The investigation at the time was plagued by irregularities and human rights violations. Rather than seeking to uncover the truth, it sought to conceal it, particularly the role of the military and federal police.

An Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI), appointed by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), began work in 2015 and questioned the official version from the outset. Based on forensic analysis, it rejected the claim that the students had been cremated at the landfill as impossible under the circumstances described by the authorities.

Its 2015 and 2016 reports also exposed the falsification of records, destruction of evidence and systematic torture of detainees and suspects throughout the official investigation.

For years the parents pursued the truth, holding onto slim hopes that some of the students might still be alive, and were backed by mass protests and broad popular support.

Despite the promises of Peña Nieto’s supposedly “leftist” presidential successors from the Morena party, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) and Claudia Sheinbaum, to pursue a thorough investigation, the full truth remains shielded from view.

Shortly after taking office in December 2018, AMLO created the Commission for Truth and Access to Justice, and a special unit was set up in the federal Attorney General’s Office to manage the investigation.

The Truth Commission proceeded at a tortoise pace over the next four years, reflecting resistance in the higher echelons of the state and prolonging the parents’ grief.

In March 2022, the GIEI presented its third report, exposing the involvement of high-level officials and institutions in the cover-up. It documented the military’s infiltration and surveillance of the college before, during and after the events in Iguala, and the manipulation of the alleged Cocula crime scene by members of the Navy.

Navy drone footage, kept secret for more than seven years, showed marines and Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam at the Cocula landfill before the official “discovery” of the crime scene there. The GIEI also found that the testimonies underpinning the official version had been obtained through torture.

The AMLO administration’s Truth Commission was forced to concede that the disappearance of the 43 was a “state crime” and that the original investigation had been a deliberate cover-up. AMLO’s Human Rights Undersecretary, Alejandro Encinas, later alleged that six of the 43 were kept alive in a warehouse for days and then turned over to the commander of the 27th Infantry Battalion in Iguala, Col. José Rodríguez Pérez, who allegedly ordered them killed. Rodríguez Pérez was later promoted to general.

In 2022, an arrest warrant was issued against Peña Nieto’s attorney general, Jesús Murillo Karam, the architect of the initial investigation and its “historical truth.” He remains under house arrest and has yet to be tried. Another key figure in the cover-up, Tomás Zerón, who headed the Criminal Investigation Agency under Murillo Karam, fled to Israel, which has declined Mexico’s request to extradite him.

In August 2022, warrants were also issued against 20 soldiers and officers from the 27th and 41st Infantry Battalions in Iguala, five Guerrero administrative and judicial officials, 44 municipal and state police officers and 14 members of the Guerreros Unidos gang.

However, in August–September 2022 the Attorney General’s Office (FGR) cancelled 21 of the 83 warrants, 16 of them against soldiers, and special prosecutor Omar Gómez Trejo resigned in protest. Seventeen soldiers have since been prosecuted, but none has been convicted.

The former mayor of Iguala, José Luis Abarca, is accused of ordering the municipal police to detain the students and hand them over to Guerreros Unidos. But in 2023 a judge acquitted him of kidnapping the 43, a ruling upheld on appeal. He remains in prison on other charges.

Rodríguez Pérez attended an event hosted by Abarca's wife, María de los Ángeles Pineda, on the night of the attack. He must have known what was afoot, but did nothing to protect the students. In 2022 he was charged over the six students allegedly held in the warehouse, but in July 2024 a judge released him on bail, and he remains free.

Twelve years on, according to the Associated Press, not a single person has been convicted of the disappearance or murder of the students.

The highest levels of the Defense Ministry and the national intelligence agency have escaped any scrutiny or prosecution. It beggars belief that they were not fully informed in 2014 of the role of the local military units. At a minimum, they covered it up, and they retain impunity to this day.

Despite all this, the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH), in Recommendation 208VG/2026 of July 9, went so far as to absolve the Armed Forces of institutional responsibility. The parents replied that it "takes us back to the historical truth."

The September 28 report was presented by Mauricio Pazarán, head of the Special Investigation and Litigation Unit for the Ayotzinapa Case, and Arturo Medina, Undersecretary of Human Rights at the Interior Ministry.

Based on a reanalysis of some 80,000 telephone records, it found that the phones of three of the 43 were used by a former Iguala official, a police officer and the wife of a municipal official in the days and weeks after the attack.

Pazarán said it was now possible to reconstruct communications between Guerreros Unidos members, police officers, public servants and private individuals on the night of September 26–27, 2014. "Today we know who communicated with whom, how many times, and at what time," he said. The analysis identified 17 people never previously investigated.

The report also explores whether some 17 of the *normalistas* passed through Iguala's Barandilla police station that night.

Based on calls between Guerreros Unidos members, police, officials and people linked to funeral homes and the government's Forensic Medical Service (Semefo), the report posits that some students may have been taken to funeral homes and the morgue to "disappear" evidence through incineration.

One of these calls led to Rodolfo Rueda, owner of the El Ángel funeral home, whose family held the concession for the local morgue and had an interest in the municipal cemetery. Prosecutors established that Rueda used the phone of *normalista* Julio César Mondragón Fontes, one of the three students killed that night, on October 4, 2014. Searches of the funeral home and morgue turned up bone fragments and an unregistered crematorium oven. Rueda and three relatives have been arrested. So far, none of the remains analyzed match the students.

Some of this material is being analyzed with the participation of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, which has worked on the case from the outset.

While these details are of great importance to the families, they do nothing to expose the complicity of the military and the government as a whole in covering up, if not participating in, the atrocity.

Medina said 17 military personnel are being prosecuted, but cited no names or court dates. In all, the special unit reports 168 people prosecuted, 130 of them in prison, and 31 arrests since October 2024.

Critically, the Army's role that night remains obscured. The Defense Ministry (Sedena), which is defying the court order on its intelligence files, is blocking any inquiry.

It is no surprise that one protesting *normalista* rather of a September 26: "The one who controls the country is the Army, that much is clear to me now."

The report also highlighted the August 6 arrest of former Guerrero governor Ángel Aguirre of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), who has been ordered to stand trial for enforced disappearance for allegedly having security footage from the Guerrero Superior Court hidden or destroyed. Aguirre stepped down in October 2014 after weeks of protests. His arrest is belated, to say the least, since his role was known years ago.

During his term, AMLO, Sheinbaum's mentor and predecessor, relied increasingly on the military to rule. He created a militarized National Guard and placed it under the Defense Ministry, a move written into the Constitution in 2024 with Sheinbaum's backing. In 2022, his government extended the armed forces' domestic deployment from 2024 to 2028.

These moves revealed an increasingly authoritarian course and a reliance on the military to suppress any threat of working-class unrest.

Commitment number 9 of the 100 that Sheinbaum announced on taking office in October 2024 promised to "continue working with the families to achieve truth and justice until we find all the disappeared young people of Ayotzinapa." But she is going down the same road as AMLO in protecting the military from scrutiny.

Particularly revealing is her response to the court order on the intelligence files: she has merely relayed the Army's claim that the documents do not exist or that there is nothing left to hand over. "No one is being covered up," she declared on September 21.

The GIEI left the case in July 2023, citing the military's refusal to hand over information. In May of this year, the government told the families of the *normalistas* that its return was not feasible.

In July, Sheinbaum announced that the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights would instead propose new "independent experts," excluding the GIEI, which she declared "no longer exists."

Ayotzinapa remains a powerful symbol of state-sponsored criminality in Mexico and of the Mexican state's decades-long suppression of popular resistance to class oppression.

After twelve years of appeals to the Mexican presidency, the ruling Morena party, the IACHR, the United Nations and the CNDH, the full truth remains buried, the military command untouched and its role shrouded.



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