

# What Happened to Ayotzinapa? The Story of Another National Outrage

José Buendía\*



Henry Romero/Reuters

Seven months after the students from Ayotzinapa disappeared now one year ago, an “anti-monument” appeared on Mexico City’s Reforma Boulevard, one of the capital’s most emblematic thoroughfares and the frequent site of demonstrations and protests that disrupt the city’s financial and political center almost daily. Out of the soil in its central divider rises a three-meter-high structure in the form of a plus sign and the number 43, as though it appeared from *the nothingness* to which the normal school students were reduced. The movement of the parents of the victims of the Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Normal School picked one of the most important points along the 14.7 kilometers of Reforma Boulevard to erect this: it is known as “information corner,”<sup>1</sup> as though the site itself was making their main demand, the right to know, patently clear.

Along that same avenue, the parents periodically express their demand that the search for the young people continue. The official story, however, is that that is impossible because

they were “deprived of their freedom, their lives, burned, and thrown into the Cocula River” by a local cartel with links to the municipal authorities of Iguala in Guerrero state. When the investigation by the Attorney General’s Office (PGR) ended last January, this was the version presented by then-Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam as the “historic truth,” which is legally valid according to the jurisdictional bodies. However, the parents simply considered it the official story and demand an accounting by all those involved in this crime against humanity. Some people think that this is part of their natural refusal to believe in the tragedy, but others think their rejection of the official version goes far beyond their grief, and the government has suggested that they do not accept the investigation results because they are being manipulated. Nevertheless, they have pushed their cause onto the political stage, expressing their indignation with calls to not go to the polls in Guerrero in June 7 local elections.

Despite the fact that at the public presentation of the investigation results an attempt was made to close the book on the matter, domestic pressure and international scrutiny

\* Political analyst and journalist, jbuendia@gimm.com.mx.

The cruelty of the execution of the normal school students and the discovery of new graves during the search for them caused the biggest security crisis of the current administration. President Peña Nieto himself called the violence in Guerrero “barbarism”.

have kept the case alive. Above all, what is being sought is to continue to shed light upon the many other cases of forced disappearances whose victims are hidden in hundreds of unknown, clandestine graves. On the one hand, some demand that the search continue despite the ashes found in the Cocula River, which are almost useless for identifying victims using scientific procedures like DNA testing. On the other hand, international bodies have expressed concern innumerable times about human rights in the country, to the point of even saying that disappearances and torture are “generalized.”

The movement of parents and NGO activists has rejected the PGR’s conclusions and increased their demands to include not only the presentation of their children alive, but also that they have access to all the information about what happened that night of September 26-27, 2014, which led to the darkest night for human rights in the last quarter century. The location of the “anti-monument” and its symbolism seek to make completely clear that another of the victims of the “Iguala case” has been precisely information. The tragedy became the face of the thousands of disappearances caused by the war against the drug traffickers over the last decade that remain hidden from the public.

Until the “official version” was announced on January 27, 2015, the interpretations about the reasons for the slaughter ran rampant amidst the authorities’ sluggishness and confused answers, regardless of the recognition of the professional, exhaustive investigation headed by Murillo Karam. The official version of the fate of the disappeared contains elements that make it believable, in addition to the fact that the PGR’s work has been positively assessed by several international human rights bodies. All of this has not been sufficient, however, to close the book on the matter, and contradictions even continue to arise in the investigation by experts from the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (CIDH), invited by the Mexican government to issue another result. For example, according to the CIDH, government authorities and police knew from the beginning that the young people were Ayotzinapa students, while the official version maintains that their captors confused them with members of the local Los Rojos

(The Reds) Cartel, an opposing criminal group to those responsible for the massacre, the Guerreros Unidos (Warriors United) Cartel.

Different attempts have been made to explain the crime. For example, one explanation has been that it was a confrontation between Guerreros Unidos and old, remaining cells of a guerrilla movement in the state, based on a communiqué from the Indigenous Peoples Revolutionary Army (ERPI) that declared war on that cartel. Another argument has been to attempt to personally place all responsibility, whether deliberately or not, on Iguala’s “narco-mayor,” José Luis Abarca (from the Party of the Democratic Revolution) and his wife, María de los Ángeles Pineda, for the evident collapse of the local institutions. However, even today, most people admit that the causes are unknown and that they are perplexed by the senselessness of the killings, regardless of the “official investigation’s” reconstruction of the events based on the confessions of 39 police, 487 affidavits from experts, 386 formal statements by witnesses, and 153 inspections.

Thanks to this shock wave that reverberated throughout the country, from the swampy sands of violence and corruption of the Cocula River emerged a tragedy that was much more extensive than the case of Ayotzinapa: the problem of forced disappearances managed to surface despite efforts by the previous National Action Party administration of Felipe Calderón and the current Institutional Revolutionary Party administration to hide and stave off accountability for security and crime-fighting policies. The 43 young people who disappeared were added to the 266 people that only four months previously had already become forced disappearance statistics, but had practically gone unnoticed in reports and private statements, like the one made by former national Ombudsman Raúl Plascencia on May 21, 2013.

Forced disappearances constitute a human rights crisis “of enormous proportions” in Mexico, as Human Rights Watch says, that has existed for a very long time and is not an isolated case of Guerrero state. The same is true for the impunity that accompanies almost all the cases. From 2005 to June 2014, the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) has registered 24 800 disappearances, while other sources cite a higher number, and no reliable official count exists. In addition, indications exist that in 2 344 cases, public servants were involved.

The cruelty of the execution of the normal school students and the discovery of new graves during the search for them caused the biggest security crisis of the current administra-

tion. President Peña Nieto himself called the violence in Guerrero “barbarism” and admitted that communities exist in the country with complete vacuums of authority and complicity between authorities and criminals. However, in the case of forced disappearances, the cloak of silence and impunity does not stem solely from the disarray of municipal or state institutions.

For example, the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights (UNHCHR) has said that for years it has noted the impunity prevailing in Mexico in the cases of enforced disappearances, extra-judicial executions, and torture, and has informed the authorities. Despite the figures for the last decade, from 2009 to 2014, the CNDH only made a paltry 17 recommendations. The UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances has asked the CNDH for information about complaints, recommendations, and its work, since it did not include those numbers in its report about Mexico last March. The tension accumulated around this issue between Mexican authorities and representatives of international human rights bodies spilled over with cases like the alleged illegal executions in Tlatlaya and the disappeared students from Ayotzinapa, which the Mexican government has continued to treat as kidnappings, given the absence of protocols and laws on forced disappearances.<sup>2</sup> Mexican law does not recognize the existence of enforced disappearance. Therefore, it also lacks a trustworthy list of the disappeared beyond a “data base” that the Calderón administration is purported to have left behind on compact discs in the Ministry of the Interior. These CDs have been lost.

For this very reason, Congress has committed to writing up and passing a law about enforced disappearances, as well as its respective protocols and registries. The legislation is important, but insufficient. The cloak of silence covering this issue was ripped to shreds in the Ayotzinapa case by the demonstrations of indignation about the tragedy and impunity. This shows the importance of social controls for ensuring that things get done, and there is an attempt to get to the “bottom” of the issue, as the CNDH continues to promise seven months after the events. The thousands of disappeared in the country over the last decade reflect, first of all, the absence of government control to impede crimes against humanity. Second, they show the authorities’ inability to prosecute and punish those responsible, as well as the fact that the federal and local human rights commissions have not even denounced them.

Proof of all this is that, up until now, the demand for accountability in the tragedy has not turned into any sanction

Most people admit that the causes  
of the violence in Ayotzinapa  
are unknown and are perplexed  
by the senselessness of the killings, regardless  
of the official investigation.

for any authority, except those originally pinpointed as those who ordered the students be “picked up”: the mayor of Iguala and his wife. Impunity for those politically responsible has been supported, as on other occasions, by local congresses and parties, which have even accepted schemes like the proposal by then-governor of Guerrero state, Ángel Aguirre, for holding a public consultation about revoking his mandate, in order to stay in office amidst his state’s institutional debacle. Aguirre finally resigned under the pressure of the mobilizations, and, above all, his party’s pressure given the up-coming elections. However, neither he nor those in charge of security in his administration have been held responsible for the crime. Seven months after the tragedy, more than 100 people have been arrested, including police and alleged members of the Guerreros Unidos Cartel, accused of participating in the massacre. The most recent of them is the former operational deputy director of Iguala’s municipal police, Francisco Salgado Valladares. Also being held are the mayor of Iguala and his wife, although in her case with weak arguments and evidence that have already made it possible to get injunctions against her prosecution.

There is also no information about the role of the soldiers and the 27<sup>th</sup> Military Zone, headquartered in Iguala a short distance from where the clashes took place between local police and students, who were then loaded onto a truck during the night. Almost two months after the CIDH experts began a parallel investigation, they had not received authorization to interview any military personnel. The person in charge of that military zone was transferred and no soldier has been deposed up until today, despite the fact that it is quite hard to believe that anything could move in the area where the greatest amount of opium is produced in the state without the soldiers’ knowledge. CIDH envoys have complained of the obstruction of their obtaining statements and testimony.

The lack of punishment is the problem that undermines Mexico’s institutions of justice and security. We know that 90 percent of crimes go unreported nationwide. But the surfacing of crimes against humanity like enforced disappearance has been effective in making the collapse of our institutions

Forced disappearances constitute  
a human rights crisis “of enormous proportions”  
in Mexico that has existed for a very long time and  
is not an isolated case of Guerrero state.

visible, particularly on a local level. It could even be a point of inflection for rebuilding the rule of law and modernizing the justice system, as Peña Nieto demanded, as long as the pacts of mutual complicity involving governors, parties, congresses, judges, and human rights commissions are broken.

For more than a century, the country’s history could be told through the failed attempts at modernization, which have succumbed to violent movements, revolutions, or popular uprisings. Benito Juárez’s effort to build a republican government through the ballot box was thwarted by the French Intervention; the 1910 Revolution against Porfirio Díaz under the banner of “effective suffrage and no reelection” ended in the formation of the authoritarian, single-party Institutional Revolutionary Party system; and President Salinas de Gortari’s trip to the First World through the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement produced the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas. Today, the promise of “moving Mexico” toward a new chapter of modernization through Peña Nieto’s structural reforms has bogged down in the human rights crisis opened by the Tlatlaya and Ayotzinapa cases. This has become the biggest challenge for democracy since an opposition party won the presidency, culminating the process of alternating in office.

The basis for any democratic rule of law, such as the one we aspire to build, is respect for human rights. Those rights have been brought into question by both these crimes given that military and civilian authorities responsible for guaranteeing their protection are involved. These facts shed a shadow of doubt on the political system and its parties due to the persistence of authoritarian ways of exercising power.

Mexico is once again the scene of violence and reflects the authorities’ inability to clear up crimes and overcome the profound crisis of mistrust in the state and its institutions. The basic problem is that, standing behind Iguala are the thousands of disappeared in other parts of the country, as well as the corruption that shores up impunity and has become a cancer that the political class has refused to attack. Proof of this is that even the legislative commission investigating the Iguala case has met with obstacles to its work due to the lack of inter-government coordination and the non-transparency

in how information is handled between the different authorities involved.

Despite this, the response of the political class to these events could turn these tragedies into an opportunity to relaunch the human rights agenda and the construction of democracy, as long, of course, as it does not succumb to the temptation of using old, worn-out formulas, simulating symbolic ways out, or making cosmetic reforms. At stake in the resolution of Tlatlaya and Ayotzinapa is a large part of the possibility of success for the structural reforms, which, until recently, it was thought would move ahead without attacking corruption and the complex varieties of violence generated by illegality. The force of the complaint and international pressure must make the federal government aware that the reform agenda has not concluded, as was said after the energy reform passed.

The agreement of the parties to push forward the creation of a National Anti-corruption System may be a good step if there is political will to attack the web of complicities that affect everyone and that, as also shown in the Iguala case, now incorporate crime in them and in state structures. The official accusation that the Iguala mayor and his wife headed a local cartel and ordered the police to disappear the students is a blow against the political class’s credibility, situating the problem of corruption on a new plane that involves its very survival.

Until now, the fight against corruption has been part of the campaigns of successive administrations and party propaganda. In fact, they have done very little to change the systematic abuse in the exercise of power in patrimonialist, opaque ways without any effective accountability. They have done very little to design controls of legality and to sanction law-breaking. However, today we are at a turning point that we hopefully will be able to take advantage of to recover the future. ■■■

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This is the corner of Reforma Boulevard and Bucareli Avenue, known as “information corner” because two of Mexico’s most important newspapers, *Excelsior* and *El Universal*, are headquartered there.

<sup>2</sup> In Tlatlaya, State of Mexico, more than 20 persons were killed, some of whom, disarmed, were executed with a *coup de grace* to the head, showing that government authorities were involved in the events. [Editor’s Note.]