

MEXICO - Amnesty International's Visit to Mexico: The Shameful Conclusions

Emilio Godoy, IPS

Friday 3 August 2007, posted by [Manuela Garza Ascencio](#)

[IPS](#) - "They tortured me, took away my shoes, and beat me brutally, with a lot of hatred and fury," said Pedro Alvarado, a human rights activist arrested by Mexican police in 2006.

Alvarado was one of the victims of a crackdown in San Salvador Atenco, 15 kilometres from the Mexican capital, during a clash between local residents and police in May.

After his arrest, the activist was released on bail and is facing prosecution on charges of attacks on the public highway and the transport system.

His testimony and that of others involved in the affair in the farming town of San Salvador Atenco was heard by a delegation from the London-based Amnesty International (AI) during their current visit to Mexico.

The experts also investigated other episodes of human rights violations and impunity, like the so-called "dirty war" against dissidents and government opponents in the 1970s and 1980s, the repression of a popular uprising that broke out in the southern state of Oaxaca in May 2006, and the hundreds of women disappeared and murdered in Ciudad Juárez in the north.

The mission, headed by AI secretary general Irene Khan, has met this week with members of human rights organisations and visited Oaxaca. From this Thursday the delegation will hold meetings with members of the federal government, including conservative President Felipe Calderón of the National Action Party (PAN).

Khan told the press that the Calderón administration, which took office in December, has not fulfilled its promise to respect human rights, and impunity is part of the problem. She said it was very sad and discouraging to listen to stories about failure to respect human rights and shortcomings in the quality of justice.

In Atenco, the security forces arrested over 200 people, searched houses without warrants, and beat and abused a number of women, as documented by human rights groups.

In 2002, people in Atenco had taken direct action to resist the building of an airport on their land, and were successful. The same organised group clashed with police in 2006 over the eviction of a group of flower vendors from the local market.

In Oaxaca, meanwhile, social conflict broke out in May 2006 between a striking teachers' union and the state government headed by Ulises Ruiz, which grew into a general popular uprising demanding the governor's resignation, led by the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (APPO), an umbrella group of some 300 local organisations.

The conflict quickly became violent. About 20 people were killed, most of them allegedly by police action or at the hands of thugs ordered in by the governor, and 370 were injured. Three hundred and fifty people were arrested. Because Ruiz, widely regarded as corrupt, remains in power, the protests resumed in June this year.

On Tuesday AI released a report on the human rights situation in Oaxaca, one of the poorest states in Mexico, which documents 18 unsolved murders, and cases of arbitrary detention and police brutality committed between June 2006 and April 2007.

Ruiz, a member of the most conservative wing of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) which governed Mexico for 71 years, dismissed the report which he said was written "by APPO advisers."

Khan said that her visit to Oaxaca and her interview with Ruiz had clearly shown that he lacked the political will to confront the grave human rights violations that have occurred in the state, many of which had been documented by AI.

One day after the AI delegation's visit to Oaxaca, a bomb went off in a department store in the capital city, also called Oaxaca, causing material damages. The Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR) claimed responsibility. Another bomb placed in a bank was disarmed.

The EPR, formed in 1996, also claimed responsibility for the Jul. 10 sabotage of gas pipelines owned by the Mexican state oil company in the states of Jalisco, in the west, and Querétaro, in the centre of the country, in support of its demand for the release of two of its members who allegedly disappeared in Oaxaca in May.

At Khan's meetings this Thursday and Friday with Ministers of the Interior, Francisco Ramírez, of Public Security, Genaro García, and of Foreign Relations, Patricia Espinosa, "the Mexican government will authenticate its full commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms of all Mexicans," the Foreign Ministry said in a communiqué.

The AI mission also heard complaints from relatives of the victims of the dirty war, and of the wave of gender violence in Ciudad Juárez, where at least 350 women have been murdered since 1993.

"Sometimes we just want to give up the fight, it's as though we were up against a brick wall," Patricia Cervantes, of the non-governmental organisation Justice for Our Daughters, told IPS. Her daughter Neyra disappeared in May 2003 in Chihuahua, the state where Ciudad Juárez is located. Her body, bearing signs of rape, was found in June that year.

The government decided to close down the Commission to Prevent and Eradicate Violence against Women, created in 2004 to look into the Ciudad Juárez killings. Another 16 women have been murdered so far this year.

"We haven't had access to justice for 30 years. We don't see any possibility of bringing those responsible to trial," said Alicia de los Ríos, whose mother, also called Alicia, was arrested by security forces in January 1978 and was never seen again.

Towards the end of his term, President Vicente Fox (2000-2006), also of the PAN, closed down the Special Prosecutor's Office for Political and Social Movements in the Past, which he had himself established in 2001 to investigate crimes committed during the dirty war.

In the view of human rights organisations, the outcome of the Special Prosecutor's Office was poor: it investigated 532 cases which resulted in seven arrest warrants, but not a single conviction.

One of the unfulfilled challenges of the Special Prosecutor's Office was to clear up the massacres committed on Oct. 2, 1968 and Jun. 10, 1971, when police and paramilitaries fired on unarmed civilians, killing an undetermined number of people.

In July the Supreme Court ruled that these actions were genocide, but no one can be held to account for them, as the interior minister and former President Luis Echeverría (1970-1976) at the time was exonerated by the Court.

"The Special Prosecutor's Office failed, and the issue of the past is off this government's agenda," said

Rupert Knox, an AI investigator for Mexico who is participating in the visiting delegation.

According to the Special Prosecutor's Office, 12 massacres, 120 extrajudicial killings, 800 forced disappearances and 2,000 acts of torture against detainees were committed by security agents in the late 1960s, the 1970s, and the early 1980s.

Next week a delegation from the Washington-based Inter-American Commission on Human Rights will arrive in Mexico, led by its president, Florentín Meléndez. Their itinerary will include a visit to Oaxaca.

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