

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
Human Rights Challenges in Mexico
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Statement of María Luisa Aguilar Rodríguez
Human Rights Center Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez

Mr. Chairmen,

Good afternoon. My name is María Luisa Aguilar. I am the Advocacy Coordinator at the Human Rights Center, Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez (Prodh Center). I am grateful for the opportunity to address the Commission.

Ten years ago, in May 2012, this Commission held a hearing about Mexico's human rights situation. On that occasion, colleagues from human rights organizations insisted that impunity was widespread and was a standing invitation for violence to continue permeating our country.

Ten years on, many things have changed in Mexico, but not the human rights crisis nor the widespread impunity.

We now have an official record of [100,000 disappeared persons](#) and more than 50,000 unidentified human bodies. [Homicides](#) and executions are not decreasing.

Let me give just one painful example very close to us, at Center Prodh. Four days ago, [two priests of the Jesuit order](#), founders of our Human Rights Centre, were murdered in a remote community in the state of Chihuahua. A member of organized crime, operating under the protection of the Mexican authorities, opened fire on them when the priests opened the doors of the temple to a person seeking refuge. Their bodies were only recovered and identified today. In addition, at least two people were disappeared on the same day in related events and their whereabouts are still unknown. Father Javier and Father Joaquin were two good men, who for decades served the poorest of the poor in one of the most neglected indigenous regions of the country.

Events like this happen all the time in Mexico. We continue to record more than [35,000 homicides per year](#), with annual rates of more than 25 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants.

This is indisputably influenced by the demand for drugs from the United States and the trafficking of assault weapons across our border, but let me be clear, the primary

responsibility for preserving the lives and rights of the population lies with the Mexican authorities. They - including the current federal administration that came to power with the promise of change - have failed us.

From our perspective, the two main factors that explain the persistency of the violence and insecurity crisis in Mexico are the failed militarized security policy and the absence of effective and truly autonomous prosecutors' offices. I will elaborate on both issues.

First, is the militarized security policy. For more than 15 years, administrations have relied on the army and the navy as the answer to widespread violence. However, violence has not diminished and the armed forces frequently commit human rights violations, without being held fully accountable to civilian authorities. The current federal administration, without first reviewing or promoting investigations to hold the armed forces in past cases of abuses and corruption responsible, created a new nationwide [militarized police force called the National Guard](#). Despite the fact the National Guard is a civilian force by law, the reality is that most of its forces and especially the highest commanders are members of the Armed Forces.

Moreover, the military's participation in public life has expanded by giving them responsibilities in [many aspects of public administration](#), including infrastructure and construction projects.

Faced with this reality, it is important to remember that it is a false prerogative that Mexico faces a war between good and evil. In states like Chihuahua where the two priests were murdered, the line between the government and the criminals is frequently blurry. This also applies to the Armed Forces: it is mistaken to claim that these are incorruptible and unimpeachable forces. On the contrary, its opacity and false subjection to civilian controls make them prone to abuse.

Therefore, we are extremely concerned by the government's [claim to seek a constitutional reform](#) to fully and irreversibly hand over the National Guard to the Armed Forces, finally giving up on having a civilian police force with a national scope, reliable and democratic.

Secondly, I would like to refer to the absence of efficient and truly autonomous prosecutors' offices. A few years ago, a broad civil society coalition launched several initiatives to fundamentally reform this key aspect of our broken justice system. Reforms were adopted and changes to practices were announced. However, today we have to accept, that in most of the country we only adopted the modification of institutional names, nothing more. The capacity to scientifically investigate crimes and unravel criminal networks remains as lacking and deficient as ever.

The disappointment at the lack of change in the justice system is all the greater because of the responsibilities of the federal Attorney General's Office. Instead of having an Attorney General who makes ground-breaking proposals to face the challenges of the present and prepare the justice system for the challenges of the future, we have an Attorney General who seeks to return to the authoritarian past,

even promoting counter-reforms that could undermine changes or improvements that took decades to achieve. That is why in Mexico, [95% of the homicides are not solved](#), this means that out of every 10 homicides, less than 1 is solved and sanctioned with a sentence.

I want to emphasize that Mexico's impunity problem is situated primarily with prosecutors and not judges. Despite the stigmatizing rhetoric of the current government against the judiciary, with the only purpose of undermining judicial independence. The main issues are corruption, collusion, and lack of capacities of the investigators of crimes.

Finally, I want to insist that to address the human rights crisis in Mexico, the work of civil society is fundamental. State institutions must indeed be strengthened, but there will only be progress if victims' collectives, civil organizations and independent journalists are also strengthened. This is how we have achieved normative and practice changes before. More than ever, it is fundamental to recognize this because in our country, as in many parts of the world, aggressive rhetoric is used against the work of civil society.

To conclude:

Like Fathers Javier and Joaquín, for whose murder today I ask you specially to demand for justice; thousands of Mexicans are living the consequences of the ongoing violence. This must be understood as a human rights crisis and the solutions, therefore should involve collaboration with the international community and in particular with the United States.

Thank you.