



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Human Rights Challenges in Mexico

Thursday, June 23, 2022

3:00 – 4:30 p.m.

Virtual via Cisco WebEx

As prepared for delivery

Good afternoon and welcome to this afternoon's Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission on the human rights situation in Mexico. I extend a special thanks to our witnesses today, three of whom are joining us from Mexico.

This Commission last held a hearing on human rights in Mexico in May 2012.

At that time, 50,000 people were estimated to have been killed in drug-related violence in Mexico. Security forces were accused of torture and involvement in extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances. Abuses were being fueled by corruption, links between law enforcement personnel and criminal groups, a weak justice system and widespread impunity. Migrants, human rights defenders and journalists were often the victims.

In fact, just a few days before that hearing, authorities had found the dismembered bodies of three photojournalists in a canal in the city of Boca del Río.

Ten years later, it is hard to argue that the situation has improved.

Just three days ago, in the state of Chihuahua, three men were shot to death inside a church: two Jesuit priests, Javier Campos Morales and Joaquin César Mora Salazar, and a third man, Pedro Palma, a tourist guide.

The priests had been trying to protect the guide from the man who is now accused of murdering them - a local crime boss the priests knew and who had an outstanding arrest order for the 2018 killing of U.S. tourist.

All of us surely condemn these horrific murders. I was immediately reminded of the brutal assassination of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter in El Salvador in 1989, at the height of that country's civil war. It is heart-breaking and enraging that the Mexican priests, who similarly had dedicated their lives to ministering to the poor, met the same fate.

Nationwide, [34 priests have been murdered in Mexico since 2012](#), including Father Campos and Father Mora. At least seven of the killings have occurred since President Andrés Manuel López Obrador took office. The slayings reinforce Mexico's reputation as one of the world's most murderous countries for Catholic clergy.

But it is important to understand that the murders of Father Campos and Father Mora were not an isolated event. The rural region where they ministered is overrun with organized crime. Some thirty indigenous leaders have been killed there in the past two decades and hundreds of people have been displaced as criminal organizations have expanded.

Yesterday I met with several human rights defenders who just received the 2022 Front Line Defenders Award for Human Rights Defenders at Risk. Among them were Javier and María del Tránsito, professors from Guanajuato, Mexico.

Their daughter Guadalupe, also a teacher, disappeared in February 2020. A year later her remains were found in a clandestine grave along with 80 other bodies.

After she was found, her brother Javier joined the state-level search commission to continue looking for other missing persons and support their families. As a result of his human rights work, Javier was killed on May 29, 2021, by individuals linked to the disappearance of his sister. Their parents were forced to flee Guanajuato to protect themselves.

Guadalupe's disappearance is also not an isolated case. Many of us followed the grisly case of the 43 students who disappeared in September 2014 from a rural teachers' college. Seven and a half years later, evidence of state complicity has grown while truth and justice for the victims remain elusive.

Last month, Mexico reached a grim milestone: 100,000 people officially registered as disappeared. That is a stunning number.

In a report issued in April, the U.N. Committee on Enforced Disappearances concluded that “a generalized situation of disappearances persists in a large part of Mexico’s territory, accompanied by near-total impunity and revictimization.”

This is why several Members of Congress, myself included, recently wrote to the Biden Administration to ask what the U.S. is doing through its bilateral cooperation to address this tragic situation.

Several of us also wrote to the Administration to ask what is being done in response to the killing of journalists.

One hundred forty-five journalists have been killed in Mexico since 2000, eleven of them in 2022 alone. Mexico consistently ranks among the countries with the most unsolved journalist murders per capita. Those who investigate corruption and organized crime, especially if the cases involve public officials, are at particular risk.

These statistics are comparable or worse than those of countries actively at war.

To give just one data point, in Colombia between 1992 and 2022, a time period that covers the worst years of the internal armed conflict, ninety-three journalists and media workers were killed. That is an appalling number. Yet the absolute number of killings in Mexico is even worse.

In recent years, the U.S. has taken steps to help Mexico improve human rights conditions. We will include a brief summary of the U.S. response in the record of this hearing.

At the insistence of Congress, vetting requirements are in effect for security force units receiving U.S. training and equipment. There is support for human rights and rule of law programming, and conditions and reporting requirements have been placed on foreign assistance funds. One initiative is investing \$2.5 million dollars to respond to forced disappearances in Chihuahua, the state where the priests were just killed.

Yet the panorama remains bleak.

This hearing, then, is an opportunity to hear from human rights organizations that monitor Mexico and work on the ground there. Our question to them is what has worked, even if on the margins, to improve the protection of human rights in Mexico; what simply is not working; and what more we can do. They are witnesses to the gut-wrenching violence that is consuming Mexico. We will be well-served by their analysis and recommendations.

I turn now to Human Rights Commission Co-Chair Chris Smith for his opening remarks.