

Mexico's "war on drugs" employs army torture and police-state tactics

Rafael Azul, Kevin Kearney
25 May 2009

Mexico's National Human Rights Commission (CNDH), an independent government agency, has reported that the Mexican army is torturing citizens just across the US border in its war on drug cartels. The report reveals a systematic practice of arbitrary detentions, beatings and electrical shocks against innocent citizens with no connection to the drug trade.

Continuing policies implemented under Bush, the Obama administration wholeheartedly supports the current military operations in Mexico. Since early 2007, the US government has provided millions in cash, military technology and military trainers, promising billions more in the coming years. Just a month before the latest torture revelations emerged, Obama described the US as a "full partner" in Mexico's bloody drug war, sending "hundreds of federal agents along with high-tech surveillance equipment...to help Mexico fight the cartels," the BBC reported.

The CNDH torture report centers on the situation in Ciudad Juarez, which became a testing ground for martial law in early March, when 10,000 troops were deployed there. According to the *Washington Post*, Mayor José Reyes Ferriz said—in an interview in his office overlooking the US border—"This is something that has never been tried before in Mexico: to have the army take over the police so completely."

According to Reyes, President Felipe Calderón and Defense Secretary Guillermo Galván Galván are involved in every major decision regarding security in the city. Ciudad Juarez is intended as a "national model" for other Mexican cities, he added.

The rule of law has been almost completely abandoned in Juarez. Nearly every bourgeois democracy has historically required that there be some objective evidence that a crime is being committed before a citizen is detained. However, in Juarez, the Mexican government has erected a cryptic legal apparatus that allows the army to conduct raids, arrest suspects and initiate wiretaps after informally presenting evidence to local prosecutors that is purportedly sent to an anonymous panel of judges in Mexico City for approval.

Héctor García Rodríguez, a representative of the federal attorney general's office in Juarez told the *Washington Post*: "We know [the judges] exist, but they work in a place that is unknown to the public... I don't even know who they are."

Mauricio Ibarra, a CNDH spokesperson, indicated that since the military deployment in Ciudad Juarez, the number of reported human rights violations has escalated dramatically. During the first quarter of the year, the commission received 172 complaints, a yearly rate of 684, more than twice the 311 filed last year. In addition, the attorney general of Juarez recently opened separate investigations into the

killing of two men while in the army custody.

According to the attorney general, the army has detained 1,465 people this year. Javier Pérez Chávez, a public defender who represents the vast majority of suspects arrested by the military, told the *Washington Post* the majority of those detained reported they were held for periods varying from several days to a week, while nearly all have reported being beaten while in the army's custody. Gustavo de la Rosa, the state human rights commissioner, describes the situation in a sentence: "The army has turned Juarez into an occupied city in which all citizens are presumed to be drug traffickers."

According to the Spanish daily *El País*, military barricades have been set up all over the city, where citizens are routinely detained for up to 12 hours at a time, threatened and often beaten before they are later handed over to investigators or released. Numerous media reports paint a picture of a town crawling with heavily armed, masked soldiers staging raids, detaining citizens, and searching travelers at the airport and border crossings, virtually at will.

The *Washington Post* article cited one illustrative case. In early April, Javier Eduardo Rosales, 21, a former X-ray technician, was found beaten to death on a motorcycle trail outside the city. Another citizen, Sergio Fernández, told Rosales's family that while buying beer, he and Rosales were detained by soldiers, blindfolded and taken to an unknown location, where they were beaten. Fernández explained that the two were then sprayed with gasoline while a soldier stood by with a match. According to Fernandez, Rosales caught the attention of soldiers because he had a tattoo of a serpent.

With a startling brazenness, the Mexican army has actually admitted to and defended some of the abuses charged by the CNDH, going so far as to declare that the torture of citizens is justified because drug gang violence has diminished under the heel of military occupation. The statement eerily echoes Washington's claims that a regression to barbaric methods of rule such as torture and a dictatorial legal structure can be justified in the name of its endless "war on terror."

Nonetheless, the army has denied other—more shocking—acts of torture. Military spokesman Enrique Torres told *El País* the more egregious cases must have been committed by civilians pretending to be army personnel, while another, nameless military spokesman gave a more detailed version of this implausible explanation to the *Washington Post* in April saying, "organized criminals have been donning army uniforms and impersonating soldiers to sow mistrust and anger against the armed forces."

While Juarez is a community plagued by poverty and desperation, the city has a deeper significance for US and world capitalism.

Ciudad Juárez is located in the Mexican state of Chihuahua, among

the top states in Mexico in terms of foreign investment. The Ciudad Juárez-El Paso area is one of the largest manufacturing centers in North America. Due to its conditions of poverty, Juarez offers some of the lowest labor costs on the continent, while its proximity to the border secures cheap and easy transportation to the world's largest consumer market. Several corporate entities such as Bosch, Lexmark, Delphi, Visteon, Lear, Boeing, Yazaki, Sumitomo, and Siemens have set up *maquiladora* sweat shops there, converting Juarez into a cheap labor platform of growing importance in the “backyard” of US imperialism.

According to the *El Paso Times*, the Juarez *maquiladoras* employ up to 250,000 people every year, while as many as 50,000 have lost their jobs due to last year's financial collapse and the ensuing economic contractions.

Mexican repression backed by Washington

For the past three years, the Mexican government has closely coordinated with Washington in its effort to militarize the entire country. The current acts of torture by the Mexican military are not new or isolated events. Rather, they represent the malignant growth of torture and police state tactics since the inauguration of President Felipe Calderon and the inception of the “war on drugs” at the close of 2006.

The Mexican daily *La Jornada* reported that in the period immediately after Calderon was elected president, nearly 600 soldiers in the Mexican military received more than 50 training courses in anti-terrorist and intelligence tactics at military installations in both the US and Mexico. In 2006, the US provided nearly \$600,000 in support to the Mexican military and Secretary of Defense (SEDENA).

The following year, after the declaration of the drug war and the signing of the Merida Initiative between Washington and Mexico, this US aid expanded to a three-year package consisting of \$1.6 billion dollars worth of equipment and training for the Mexican military.

Interestingly, the Joint Task Force North (JTFN) was identified by *La Jornada* as one of the US military agencies involved in joint anti-terrorism training exercises. The JTFN is a subordinate branch of Joint Forces Command organized under US Northern Command, or NORTHCOM—quickly created after the terrorist attacks in September 2001 and based in Fort Bliss, Texas.

According to General Anthony R. Ierardi, head of JTFN, in 2008 the agency's mission is to provide military support to domestic police forces in the United States—particularly on the Mexican border. Ierardi explained to Joe Corsi of the right-wing web site WorldNetDaily the value of participating in military operations in the Mexican border region: “...If an Army aviation unit is...preparing for deployment to Iraq, or Afghanistan...their commanders might deem that volunteering for a mission at JTF North might be good training, because of the opportunity to operate in a relevant environment that would replicate what they will face in the Middle East.”

The CNDH report is only the latest in a series of reports documenting torture. Since the outset of the drug war little more than two years and four months ago, the human rights agency has chronicled more than 2,000 cases of military abuse against the civilian population.

According to the CNDH, there has been more military violence reported against the civilian population in the first three months of this year than in any other period since the drug war began—representing 20 percent of the cases since 2006. While military violence against civilians has been registered in nearly every state of Mexico, the majority of cases in the first trimester of 2009 have come from Chihuahua State, in which Ciudad Juarez is located.

According to the Mexican weekly *El Proceso*, “The military hasn't violated human rights so much since the ‘dirty war’ of the 1970s, as it has under the Calderon administration.” What's worse, *El Proceso* reports that military tribunals have exclusive jurisdiction over civilian complaints, facilitating the military's impunity before civil authorities while exacerbating public anger.

The United Nations Committee on Torture has also denounced the widespread abuses in Mexico, while identifying the fundamental connection between torture and the dissolution of the basic right of habeas corpus. In a democracy, habeas corpus requires a public hearing in which a detainee can demand to know what he is being accused of, requiring some showing of proof by the state that there is actually a factual basis for the accusations.

However, Mexican law now allows for 80 days of so-called “preventive detention” without charges—the longest period in any “Western democracy,” according to Human Rights Watch. It is part of a practice known as an inquisitorial justice system, or “*arraigo*,” in which torture is used to extract false testimony and confessions. México's Supreme Court declared the *arraigo* unconstitutional in 2005. Yet, as part of the war on drugs, the system was brought back under Calderón.

The use of military tribunals—as opposed to civilian courts—against Mexican citizens has also caught the attention of the UN Committee on Human Rights. At the behest of several member nations, the committee has officially summoned the Calderón administration to answer at a hearing this June in Geneva, Switzerland.

In the face of these developments, President Barack Obama continues to endorse the Calderón government, providing military support above and beyond that agreed to in the Merida Initiative. According to *El Proceso*, Obama promised three Blackhawk helicopters valued at more than \$27 million each as of April 9. By all indications, US support for and guidance over the militarization of Mexico during the last three years will only escalate, posing a mortal threat to the basic rights of workers on both sides of the border.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact