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Environmentalists' Struggles in Mexico and Their Human Cost (January 2017 to April 2019)

Global expansion and the negative effects of the productive system on human beings and ecosystems have deepened the social crisis in Mexico. This is expressed in inequality and greater poverty, food insecurity, and informal labor, which in turn have unleashed an environmental crisis that in the 1960s prompted the rise of environmentalism, a “movement around the conditions, changes, defense, and protection of the environment and nature.”¹ All this time, activists have confronted—to the point of giving their lives—the interests of power enmeshed in the development of agribusiness; beer, mining, and windfarm companies; oil extraction;

and the construction of gas pipelines, dams, and highways, among other developments. In 2019, the NGO Global Witness rated Mexico as the world’s fourth most dangerous country for being involved in social activism, including the defense of the environment.²

In our publications research about selective extermination, or the unpunished annihilation of unarmed social activists in Mexico, we have delved deeply into what environmentalists have suffered from January 2017 to April 2019,³ and we share our main findings here. Our starting point has been the following questions: Which environmentalists were eliminated in this period and what were their struggles? Who was responsible for their elimination?

This led us to look at the Latin American context, crisscrossed by violence of different kinds, and we agreed with

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several authors who maintain that organized crime in Mexico and the rest of Latin America has taken on transnational proportions and acts in close connection with the legal order, seeking to consolidate a monopoly on a series of illicit markets that it has created.⁴ One of the main effects of this interpenetration of criminal elements and the legal sphere has been the human casualties among environmentalists, that is, their death, disappearance, and injury, with the aim of their not impeding the course of the business carried out in the territory.

During the period analyzed, Mexico already had 127 million inhabitants, had created a multinational market, and had become more dependent on the United States. It had focused on oil production and mining extraction and fostered a new agricultural food system and projects based on the exploitation of different natural resources, while simultaneously experiencing a broad-based political opening in which, after seventy years of Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) rule, the opposition governed on all levels.

In this context, regardless of the governing party, a process continued that we have called “the selective extermination of social activists,” which in the 1990s, had been aimed above all at indigenous and peasant leaders in southern Mexico. Added to this, at least since 2006, under the presidential administration of National Action Party (PAN) leader Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), who militarized public security, we witnessed a stage of mass extermination. By the time the period we examined began, the toll had risen to almost 300,000 deaths with the same number of forced displacements, plus 77,000 disappeared and at least 3,000 clandestine graves.

In that period, the human casualties among environmentalists made up one-third of all the attacks on social activists in eleven states, and the numbers continue to rise. Thirty of these actions caused environmentalists’ deaths—their physical elimination—, destroying along the way their community and family networks. The rest were wounded and/or disappeared.

The environmentalist mobilization that received the most attacks also received the most brutal onslaught: indigenous and peasant movements were the object of thirty-three actions. Non-indigenous rural and urban residents were targeted much less. The object of this annihilation has been to destroy the moral determination of an organized defense and resistance struggle against the imposition of development projects involving resources

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are the basis for their living conditions, their culture, and their social identity.

The environmental struggles in the period observed have been diverse. Almost half the actions that caused human casualties were against people attempting to resolve agrarian conflicts; this was followed in descending order of intensity, by those defending water rights, those opposing the building of projects and mega-projects, and against logging and mining. These different resistance fronts express the environmentalists’ capacity for organization and community commitment against local and transnational plunder of community natural resources by those trying to procure “security” for their businesses through the physical elimination of these Mexicans.

At least 55 environmentalists were murdered in the 30 actions logged. However, the numbers do not do full justice to the magnitude of the crime, since the information source does not always give the real number of victims. What we are trying to show is how the process of their extermination comes into being; from there, after observing who the targeted environmentalists were, we will speak of their perpetrators and the relations between them.

In the 1990s, the state was considered responsible for these attacks “through the presence of the armed forces and the combined forces, aided by para-military groups and armed civilians.”⁵ For the first decade of the twenty-first century, the intertwined relationship among all the levels of government (executive, judicial, and legislative branches, and their legal, though often illegitimate, use of force) and organized crime, an illegal armed force shared equally in the responsibility for these casualties.⁶

However, for the period in question, organized crime’s actions have mushroomed—newspaper reports call them variously “unknown persons,” “armed men,” “group[s] heavily armed with high-caliber weapons,” “hit men,” “gunmen,” “hooded men,” etc.—, and they are now responsible for seven out of every ten actions that resulted in human ca-

sualties among environmentalists, twenty-seven in all. In several of these actions, they have acted together with legal armed groups, called by the press “strike teams,” “subjects with the police and paramilitary groups,” “paramilitary groups,” “militants of Antorcha Campesina,” “CTM thugs,” among other descriptions.⁷

The judicial branch has also had direct responsibility for the extermination since it has carried out three out of every ten actions in which there have been environmentalist casualties, using armed units like the Special Operations Group, municipal police forces, and the State of Mexico Public Prosecutor’s Office. Also responsible have been government officials, particularly on a municipal level, in addition to certain residents, above all in matters linked to agrarian issues.

Both kinds of forces, legal and criminal, have participated in the deaths of environmentalists in different ways. The criminals have been responsible for all the actions against those in the fight over water, the defense of forests, and against mining; two-thirds of the attacks against environmentalists opposing projects and mega-projects that affect their communities; and a little over half the cases involving agrarian issues. The legal armed groups have also been responsible for the murder of environmentalists who have attempted to resolve agrarian conflicts or have opposed the development of megaprojects in their areas.

Final Reflections

We analyzed who the environmentalists are in Mexico, what their struggles are, what makes their activities so dangerous, and who their aggressors are. This led us to understand that they are resisting a complex network of economic, political, and social interests deployed throughout Mexico with transnational reach, in an environment in which organized crime is a central actor in the construction and quest for the consolidation of different illicit markets (drug trafficking, illegal arms sales, human trafficking for labor or sexual exploitation, the expropriation of natural resources, among others) that are born and prosper with the consent of the legal system. It is no surprise that most of the environmentalists murdered and disappeared are above all indigenous peasants, defenders of their territory, with the moral determination that stems from fighting for their communities’ welfare. Their

IN MEMORIAM

Murdered Environmentalists

- **Activists murdered over agrarian conflicts, among whom are members of ejido collective farms; of indigenous communal farms; Zapotec, Tzotzil, Rarámuri indigenous; local residents, and even workers:** Juan Ontiveros Ramos, Bernardino García Hernández, Estelina López Gómez, Guadalupe Huet Gómez, Julia Ramírez Salazar, Emiliana Hernández Hernández, Nazaria Juana Ramírez, María Bautista, Julián Carrillo Martínez, Adán Gómez González, Joaquín Díaz Morales, Manuel Martínez Bautista, and Ramón Hernández Nevárez and his son, Anselmo Hernández Andujo.
- **Murdered while defending water rights:** Margarito Díaz González, of the Wixárika Union of Ceremonial Centers, from the states of Jalisco, Durango, and Nayarit; Noel Castillo Aguilar, a protector of the Copalita Beach and River; Gustavo Cruz Mendoza, of the Ricardo Flores Magón Indigenous Peoples of Oaxaca Council, in the Papaloapan Basin; and forestry engineer Jesús Javier Ramos Arriola.
- **Murdered while defending the forest:** countless residents, Isidro Baldenegro López, Guadalupe Campanur Tapia, and José Nava Lorenzo.
- **Murdered during their fight against megaprojects damaging to their communities:** Rolando Crispín López, who fought against the Empresa Eólica del Sur, in Juchitán; Benjamín Juárez José, who was fighting the gas pipeline being built for the Antonio Dovalí Jaime Refinery in Salina Cruz and the Coatzacoalcos Refinery; Catarino Aguilar Márquez and Noé Valentín Aguilar Rojas, who were opposing the exploitation of sand banks on the Bolaños River banks; Manuel Gaspar Rodríguez, who fought the installation of a high voltage electrical line at the Teziutlán 2-Tajín crossroads and the construction of the Pirámides-Texcoco highway; José Alberto Toledo Villalobos, who fought against high electricity prices; and Samir Flores Soberanes, who opposed the Huexca thermo-electric plant and gas pipeline, as well as the Morelos Comprehensive Project.
- **Murdered while fighting mining interests:** ejido collective farmers living in the mining area, or mineworkers like Marcelino and Víctor Sahuanitla Peña, who, during the Media Luna miners’ clash with the Canadian company Torex Gold Resources, demanded respect for their freedom to unionize.

murderers see them as a danger to business and proceed to eliminate them using the methods described above.

The process of causing human casualties and of selective extermination of environmentalists has become

more and more complex since the 1990s, growing and expanding nationwide year after year. The group of actors who carry out this extermination has also increased and diversified. Today, there seems to be a division of labor between the criminal elements, who have the greatest direct responsibility, and the legal elements, without whom the former could not act with the impunity they have enjoyed, in order to destroy community networks and free up territory for achieving their economic, social, and political interests. ■■

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Notes

- 1 Ernesto Suárez, "Relación entre activismo proambiental y otras formas de participación social," *Psychosocial Intervention*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2002, <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/1798/179818139008.pdf>, pp. 359-369.
- 2 Global Witness, "Defender el mañana," July 29, 2020, <https://www.globalwitness.org/es/defending-tomorrow-es/>.

3 We used the daily newspaper *La Jornada*, from January 2017 to April 2019, a period that includes the presidential election campaigns, to review the actions that presumptively caused the casualties among environmentalists. We uploaded this information to our own data base, which we analyzed using the Statistic Program for Social Sciences (SPSS).

4 Marcelo Moriconi, "Desmitificar la corrupción," *Nueva Sociedad*, no. 276, July-August 2018; and Rita Laura Segato, "Las nuevas formas de la guerra y el cuerpo de las mujeres," *Sociedade e Estado*, no. 29, May-August 2014, https://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0102-69922014000200003.

5 Espacio de Reflexión y Acción Conjunta contra la Militarización, Represión e Impunidad, "El costo humano de la conflictividad social en México," *Cuadernos de Reflexión y Acción Noviolenta*, no. 3, 1999, p. 110.

6 Equipo Bourbaki, "El costo humano de la guerra por la construcción del monopolio del narcotráfico en México (2008-2009)," *Cuadernos de Marte*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2011, <http://publicaciones.sociales.uba.ar/index.php/cuadernosdemarte/article/view/2043/1744>.

7 Peasant Torch (Antorcha Campesina), or the National Antorchista Movement, is a powerful, controversial group created in 1974, initially associated with social demands; the Workers Confederation of Mexico (CTM) is a union confederation created in 1936. Both have been ideologically and practically aligned with the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) since it was in power. [Editor's Note.]

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