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Mothers Who Search Under Ground

If there are voices that give Mexico the sounds of a tireless struggle, a tone of persistence, and a rhythm of a solidarity-based collective, they are the voices of the mothers of the disappeared, both men and women. This is not an identity that any nation wants, because it reveals the entire society's inability to contain the insecurity and violence that has affected most families. The pain anchored in uncertainty about the whereabouts of their daughters, sons, brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers cuts even deeper when confronted with institutional negligence.

Forced disappearance is a very grave problem that has gone unsolved for decades; particular social trends exist due to which, as a result of the crisis of violence, thousands

of people have disappeared without a trace and without a state that investigates their whereabouts. Massacres have also happened like those of Acteal (1997) or Ayotzina (2014), a sample of the magnitude of the nationwide problem. This is no ordinary crime: this is a many-sided, complex violation of human rights.

According to *The New York Times* report "Gone,"¹ almost 100,000 people today are classified as disappeared or unlocated. Anyone who sees Mexico as a consolidated democracy would be surprised to know that, in addition to the cases in which armed non-state actors have been the ones to deprive victims of their freedom, on many occasions, state agents have been shown to have been directly involved in these acts. And they would be even more surprised to see that it has become customary for the state to refuse to recognize those detentions and reveal the whereabouts of the disappeared.

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State responsibility can be seen in three ways: the crisis of disappeared persons speaks not only to the ongoing presence of organized crime that governments have not lessened, but also of the tendency of the state to participate, even if passively, that is, through deliberate omission, in the cases of disappearances committed by private parties, or actively, as part of the commission of the crime.

As long as the state is incapable of establishing a strategy to prevent the violence of organized crime groups, the loss of life and the disappearance of bodies will continue to be a daily method for which there is no punishment, with cases, even, in which authorities are involved.

The number of disappeared persons has grown with every passing year. According to the *Informe sobre fosas clandestinas y registro nacional de personas desaparecidas* (Report on Clandestine Graves and the National Registry of Disappeared Persons), from the 1960s (mainly during the “Dirty War”) until 2020, 147,033 disappeared persons have been registered. The National Search Commission puts the figure of disappeared persons between September 2020 and July 2021 at 6,453.

With such overwhelming numbers, the faces tend to blur and we tend to de-personalize the stories. We cannot allow ourselves to be swept away by indifference in the face of the uncertainty of every woman who has lost a son or daughter without knowing what may have become of them. After the defeat of not knowing if they are alive, they decide to stop looking for them among other people, to stop seeing the glances that they might recognize, to stop hoping that they will hear a voice nearby and they might turn and recover their peace by finding them. Once they have given in to not seeing them walk again on the asphalt, they decide to start looking for them under ground.

Mexico is faced with a crisis of disappearances with a historic figure of 212,193 complaints lodged about missing persons since 1964. Although Alejandro Encinas, current vice-minister of the interior, has stated that 125,530 of those have been located, 93 percent of them alive, the

official number of persons still not located comes to 86,663.

These figures can give us an idea of the dimension of the phenomenon, but human rights experts affirm that they are lower than the real number: complaints about disappearance are the kinds of complaints that encounter the most institutional resistance, and, in terms of physical and emotional protection, some families of the disappeared opt to not put other relatives at risk, others who could suffer the same fate as a demonstration of strength by the perpetrators.

Getting up before dawn, walking kilometers with shovels, pick-axes, and the immense hope that gives their fragile bodies the strength that the wear and tear of the search has cost them: that is how these mothers arrive at the isolated weed-infested lands indicated to them by authorities or criminals themselves who feel sorry for them and pass them tips about areas that have become clandestine graves. In 2020, 559 sites were found nationwide, where they recovered 1,086 bodies. In 2019, they found 835 graves and recovered 1,324 bodies.

Although the Mexican state has created different institutions, bodies, and agencies specialized in forced disappearance, it is necessary to be aware that the pertinent action is not being taken. Nothing is being done to ensure the safety of citizens, and justice is not being served to the disappeared persons either. In addition, in recent years, during the current presidential administration, these institutions have undergone a process of being dismantled financially and structurally, a decision that leaves out in the cold the mothers who are waiting for comprehensive reparations, the most important of which is usually knowing the truth about what happened.

The need to organize has motivated thousands of mothers to carry out their own searches. Dozens of groups raise the banner of this cause and have taken upon themselves the task of digging up remains. One of these groups is the collective Forces United for Our Disappeared in Nuevo León (FUNDENL), one of the organizations created by mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives looking for their disappeared relatives. Another is Mothers Courage, as the general public knows them, who tired of waiting for the authorities to “look for” their children and other loved ones. Using technology and other resources, such as drones, trained canines, metal detectors, and volunteers, they have unfortunately become experts in locating clan-

destine burial sites. The Network of Mothers Looking for Their Children operates in Veracruz; this group, made up of seventeen families, was founded in 2015 given the need to get the attention of the authorities. Another group in this same state is Mothers in Search Of, organized in May 2015 by four families in the city of Coatzacoalcos. Lost Treasures, Until We Find Them, with fifty-five families, is the name of another group created in 2019 in the state of Sinaloa. The fact that these collectives have more than a dozen families reveals how the areas of extreme violence sacrifice entire communities. The local authorities have neither the interest nor any capability whatsoever to respond professionally and the federal authorities are overwhelmed and mutilated by the austerity imposed by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

A valid concern is the inquiry into how these mothers focus their anger on bringing together those who have gone through the same experience. In the complicated route of denouncing a disappearance, the victims' families have suffered many setbacks, but above all, they have experienced the lack of will by the authorities to actually search and the legal blocks that re-victimize them. No protection exists that would allow the victims to make the denunciations without being exposed to the possibility that the perpetrators attack them again. Seemingly, dialogue between the authorities and the perpetrators is mysteriously more effective than the dialogue they establish with the mothers of the disappeared. In their desperation when faced by the state's inaction, the families unite to pass out leaflets, hang banners, and go to the media so that the cases can be made visible somehow. And they also seek out clandestine gravesites. They divide the work: some mothers dig, others go to the jails, others look for new sites.

The main responsibility clearly falls to the governments. However, those of us familiar with the stories have at least the obligation to make them visible. By doing so, one way or another it can be ensured that the struggle is not carried solely by the mothers, but that it is taken on board by a broader collective that rallies around and accompanies them. It is therefore indispensable that we tell the stories to give names and faces to the disappeared. I'll tell you here about some that I am well acquainted with.

Margarita is the mother of a girl who was kidnapped in 2011 in Oaxaca by an armed commando headed by a government employee in the area of kidnapping, who used

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his position to negotiate inappropriately with the kidnapers. The detained criminals told him that government officials were involved. She is a tracker-mother who recovers bodies. She assures all that she has found thousands in the last decade. Araceli Salcedo is a woman from Orizaba who has spent the last four years of her life looking for her daughter, Fernanda Rubí Salcedo Jiménez, kidnapped in a club and never seen again. The authorities limited themselves to revictimizing Araceli, arguing that her daughter was kidnapped "because she was pretty." Perla Damián is looking for her son, Víctor Álvarez, missing since 2013. She founded the Little Sun of Veracruz collective, which has brought together several families who search through jails and fields. They have found 109 clandestine gravesites. Marcela Zurita, the mother of Dorian Rivera, has remodeled her son's room, turning it into a search center where she gathers information for the files of her own investigations. She says she has lost confidence in the authorities and that the only justice she expects is God's.

What do these women have in common? Their first step was to go to the authorities, place their trust in them, and leave to them the search for what they valued most in their lives, their children. What they received in return was bureaucracy, negligence, and, in some cases, even complicity with organized crime. Forced disappearance affects the rights and freedoms of the population as a whole; it is a violation of their fundamental rights. A disappeared person cannot exercise his/her rights. Therefore, it is urgent that the state implement measures to guarantee the rights of those persons and their family members. It is important to mention just how much the victims' families suffer; their relatives must face economic difficulties, forced displacement, and threats.

Forced disappearances in Latin America and Mexico have been largely linked to the armed forces. From 1960 to 1980, the Mexican state exercised repression and committed grave violations of human rights, mainly against

dissident and subversive political groups. When it adopted counter-insurgency strategies, forced disappearance became one of its main actions.

Despite the fact that the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (CIDH) showed that the army committed forced disappearances in that period, the military did not assume responsibility for guaranteeing the right to the truth. Thus, the families of the disappeared in those two decades have not been able to access the armed forces' impenetrable archives.

Devastating similarities exist with the most recent case of Ayotzinapa. The Commission for the Truth and Access to Justice, created expressly to follow up on this case, has published important information given to it by the Ministry of Defense with military communiqués dated September 26 and October 4, 2014. They confirm that the Mexican army had information unrevealed until that time, just as had been denounced by the victims' families, and that it had never been given to them despite the existence of a 2018 presidential decree obligating them to do so.

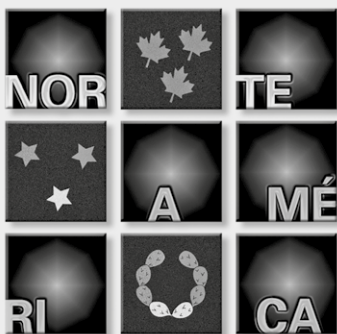
Another case of forced disappearance in which the armed forces are implicated as perpetrators happened from February to May 2018 in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. After a series of violent clashes forty denunciations of forced disappearance were made linked to at least thirty members of the Navy, charged and jailed for their participation. The Nuevo Laredo Human Rights Committee (CDHNL) denounced the complicity between authorities of the Ministry of the Navy (Semar), the Federal Attorney General's Office (FGR), and the Executive Commission for Attention to Victims (CEAV) in order to protect the sailors implicated in the disappearances.

Simulation by several administrations, including the current one, keeps the victims in a permanent state of desolation. The National System of Victims, created in 2014, has only met once, and that was in the year it was created. It has never met again, despite the fact that 2018 and 2019 were years with record numbers of homicides and femicides. Its commissioners have shown zero commitment to the victims. In fact, the current government has turned its back on them by reducing the CEAV's budget and canceling the resources earmarked for the Fund for Aid, Assistance, and Comprehensive Reparation. The CEAV was left without a director after Mara Gómez Pérez resigned in 2020; she left due to a lack of understanding with the victims themselves, but also to the drastic cuts to her budget. Since then, no one has been named to permanently head the commission, which has had only interim chiefs.

Let's tell it like it is: we are experiencing a humanitarian crisis. Mexico is in a situation that should even be analyzed by the International Criminal Court. It is urgent that the Mexican state take this problem seriously. It must dedicate resources to the investigation of cases, and the attention to victims and reparations. The mobilization of the mothers of the disappeared deserves empathetic, professional treatment. Their cause should be the cause of all of Mexico. Their voices should have an exponential echo. Hopefully, your reading this will add another voice to their struggle. ■■■

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Notes

1 The *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/10/03/world/americas/mexico-missing-people.html>.



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