LATEST:
Extreme Vulnerability of Defenders and Journalists in Mexico

FOCUS:
GUERRERO, Gaping Wound

ARTICLE:
Friar Gonzalo Ituarte Verduzco receives Fray Bartolome de Las Casas Medal

SIPAZ ACTIVITIES:
From mid-November 2021 to mid-February 2022
SIPAZ is an international observation program created in 1995, after the Zapatista uprising in 1994 to monitor the conflict in Chiapas, Mexico.

International Service for Peace (Servicio Internacional para la Paz or SIPAZ) is a response from the international community to the request of Mexican human rights organizations and religious leaders in Mexico, asking for a permanent international presence in Chiapas. In February 1995, a delegation of various international peace organizations came to Chiapas. They decided to create an organization encompassing a coalition of faith based and nonviolence based organizations in the United States, Europe and Latin America that shared a common concern regarding the situation in Chiapas.

Today SIPAZ supports the search for nonviolent solutions and aids in the construction of a culture of peace and dialogue between the actors involved in the conflict in Chiapas as well as, increasingly, in other areas in Mexico (Oaxaca and Guerrero). SIPAZ also serves as a bridge for communication and exchange between other organizations and networks that work to construct a just and lasting peace at a local, national, regional and international level.

The SIPAZ International Team in Chiapas:

- Maintains an international presence and accompanies processes that are working towards the construction of a culture of peace in Mexico.
- Provides trustworthy communication that integrates the voices of local actors and mobilizes the local, national and international community in the search for alternative solutions to the causes of violence in Mexico.
- Joins together with organizations, movements and networks in order to share and strengthen the processes that are leading towards building a just peace.
- Maintains contact and dialogue with the many different actors that are present in the conflict.

SIPAZ recognizes and respects the principles of non-intervention and sovereignty of the Mexican State and its citizens upon whom must depend the negotiation and initiative that are necessary in order to achieve an eventual solution to the conflict.

The coalition members of SIPAZ represent many years of experience in international non-governmental peacemaking and conflict resolution. Building on that experience, SIPAZ seeks to play a facilitative role enhancing the context in which Mexicans are working to solve largely Mexican problems.

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- Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America (North Carolina, USA)
- Benedictine Sisters of Erie (Pennsylvania, USA)
- Capacitar (California, USA)
- CAREA (Berlin, Germany)
- Carolina Interfaith Task Force on Central America (N. Carolina, USA)
- Catholic Conference of Major Superiors of Men’s Institutes
- Peace and Justice Committee (Washington DC, USA)
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- Witness for Peace (Washington DC, USA)
Extreme Vulnerability of Defenders and Journalists in Mexico

Ten years after the entry into force of the Law for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists, in January, the Ministry of the Interior began work to reform it. “It is time to stop along the way and reflect deeply to face a criminal phenomenon that unfortunately, despite the actions that the Mexican State has undertaken over these ten years, has not been able to reverse”, said the undersecretary of Human Rights, Population and Migration, Alejandro Encinas Rodriguez. “Currently the federal system that we have has allowed local authorities to disregard their responsibilities”, he stated. Despite the current law of 2012, attacks against journalists and human rights defenders continue: as of April 2021, there were 1,848 people with protection measures. More than 90% of the cases of aggression against them remain unpunished, the Government indicated.

Five journalists were murdered at the start of 2022 alone. In January, in approximately 47 cities throughout Mexico, thousands of people took to the streets to demand justice and an end to violence against journalists. According to data from Article 19, 28 of the 142 murdered journalists registered since 2000 were killed during the term of office of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO).

According to the annual balance of Reporters Without Borders (RSF), for the third consecutive year, Mexico is the country where most journalists were killed with a total of seven in 2021, which brings the number of victims to 47 in the last five years. According to the report, the total impunity enjoyed by the material and intellectual authors explains the persistence of the violence. RSF noted that AMLO “has failed to improve the situation.”

In February, the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), Pedro Vaca Villareal, urged the Mexican government to recognize the “crisis” of violence that journalism is going through in Mexico. He also urged it to suspend the controversial spot “Who’s Who of Lies”, which is presented every Wednesday at the president’s morning conferences. This is because “it sends confusing messages about the government’s intention to guarantee freedom of the press” and it is a “spot totally foreign to democratic standards of freedom of expression.” The IACHR rapporteur deplored the fact that, instead of outright condemning the attacks against the press, several of his statements can be understood “by society as a way of diminishing the relevance of the problem.”

Megaprojects Declared “of Public Interest and National Security” - Possible Exacerbation of Risk for Environmental Defenders

In November, a presidential agreement was published in the Official Gazette of the Federation declaring “of public interest and national security” the federal government works for communications, telecommunications, customs, railways, borders, hydraulics, water, matters of the environment, tourism, health, energy, ports and airports. Also those that, due to their complexity, object, characteristics, nature and magnitude, are considered priority or strategic for national development.

This agreement has triggered severe criticism. Experts, civil organizations, former ministers of the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation have agreed
that AMLO exceeded his powers, since he cannot modify the limits set by current legislation. In this sense, they affirm that the Agreement is unconstitutional and violates human rights, given that it not only promotes opacity, by making it possible for information about the works to be declared confidential, but also legally disarms the citizens who protect themselves against them.

In contrast, the general director of the Tehuantepec Isthmus Interocéanico Corridor, Rafael Marín, commented that the Agreement will not only facilitate the reduction of procedures and times that impede the progress of the works, but will also guarantee the rapid intervention of the authority to contain possible roadblocks. For the former president of the Caribbean Business Coordinating Council (CCEC), Francisco Córdova, “it is a desperate measure”, to give way to projects that, due to their magnitude, scope and cost, exceed six years of construction.

The National Indigenous Congress (CNI) spoke out against this policy that “legalizes dispossession with the public force to install megaprojects.” In January, it reported that it obtained from a federal judge the provisional suspension of the presidential agreement in response to 17 appeals filed by indigenous peoples and communities from Jalisco, Querétaro, Puebla, Morelos, Veracruz, Oaxaca, Campeche, Quintana Roo, Yucatán and CDMX, all from members of the CNI.

The concern on the part of civil organizations is heightened by the militarization not only of public security, but also of all areas of society. In February, AMLO announced the creation of a military company called “Olmeca, Maya Mexico”, which will be in charge of managing the Maya Train and the new airports in Santa Lucia, Tulum, Chetumal and Palenque. “It is going to allocate 75% of its profits for the retirements (...) of members of the armed forces”, he declared. He repeatedly thanked the support of the Armed Forces not only in large works (including the construction of the National Guard barracks and the branches of the Welfare Bank) but also in dealing with the pandemic. “We are working for the development of Mexico and we are doing it thanks to the collaboration of the armed forces, without rhetoric, without demagoguery, (I tell you) it would have been very difficult to face the health crisis, the economy, without the support of the secretariats of Defense and Navy, two pillars of the National State”, he added.

**CHIAPAS: Violence Becoming More Frequent**

In January, a pilgrimage of the Believing People was carried out as part of the celebrations for the 11th anniversary of Bishop Jtatic Samuel Ruiz García’s anniversary, which was attended by more than 3,000 people. A statement was read through which they gave an account of the context that exists in their communities, “especially the insecurity, violence and territorial dispute caused by organized crime, before which the authorities of the three levels of government are overwhelmed, permissive and collusive. (...) The disappearance of people, girls, boys, men and women, of different ages, has been more evident in this last year. And because of the fear of reprisals and the non-exercise of the rule of law, people do not file complaints. (...) Also the threat and assassination of social leaders and social communicators, as well as threats to Pastoral Agents.” It also denounced militarization, impunity and migrant trafficking, among others, and reaffirmed its commitment to defending the land and territory.

The area of Los Altos is one of the regions where the worsening of violence has been most noticeable. In December, the Fray Bartolome de Las Casas Human Rights Center reported that the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) asked the Mexican State to be able to “carry out an on-site visit in order to learn about the situation of the Precautionary Measures implemented in the municipalities of Aldama, Chalchihuitan and Chenalho.” This, considering that “the risk factors that endanger the safety and life of the inhabitants of 22 indigenous communities of Chiapas remain”: nine neighboring communities of the municipality of Chalchihuitan and one of Chenalho; and 12 communities in the municipality of Aldama adjoining the Santa Martha community in the municipality of Chenalho. Frayba explained that “the IACHR has shown
that to date the ministerial investigations do not have elements that indicate that the disarmament and dismantling of the people belonging to the armed groups that operate in the affected areas has been achieved, despite the actions implemented, such as the arms exchange program and intelligence activities.”

Likewise, in December, the State Congress unanimously approved the request for a license from the members of the Pantelho city council after the removal, in October, of the president-elect Raquel Trujillo Morales, at the request of the State Attorney General’s Office, which accuses him of the crime of homicide. Pedro Cortes Lopez was elected president of the municipal council through the system of uses and customs in August after the irruption of the group, which defines itself as “El Machete People’s Self-Defense Forces.” He theoretically concluded his functions on September 30th, but he continued to govern de facto, because they did not want to let Raquel Trujillo Morales or his council to enter by linking him to organized crime.

In February, the National Search Commission entered Pantelho to search for 21 people who disappeared after the popular uprising for greater security in July 2021. They were retained and exhibited in July, when more than 2,000 residents of the 86 indigenous communities and the 18 neighborhoods of Pantelho seized the mayor’s office. The families of the 21 people the commission is trying to accuse El Machete of having kidnapped and disappeared them. “They say that El Machete murdered the 21. We don’t have them, we didn’t see them. The Search Commission may come, to look for them under the stones”, replied the leader of the group. “We also have family members who have disappeared years ago”, he said, asking the authorities to search not just for the 21, but for the more than 200 who had previously disappeared.

Another hot spot has been Oxchuc. In December, the plebiscite by uses and customs took place to elect the new president of this municipality. Disagreement with the results has given rise to various situations of violence, including road blockades and house burnings, among others. It should be remembered that special elections are being prepared in six municipalities in which the last June elections were not concluded due to violent acts and lack of safe conditions. For the same reason, people fear that a climate of insecurity will be unleashed due to the dispute over political power “where communities are hostage to the lack of agreements, insecurity and roadblocks”, mentions El Heraldo de Chiapas.

Within the framework of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, several activities were carried out in November in which the lack of attention by the Chiapas Justice System to femicides was denounced. Chiapas is among the states of Mexico with the most femicides: “The year 2021 counts with 176 cases until the end of October, of which 61 are underpinned as consummated femicides”, reported The Feminist Observatory of Chiapas. 574 disappearances of children and adolescents were also registered in 2021, where girls and adolescent women represent 72% of the total.

The situation of migrants is another expression of the growing violence. December was marked by a terrible accident that left at least 53 dead and more than 50 injured, all of them migrants from Central America. It happened on the Chiapa de Corzo-Tuxtla Gutierrez road section when the driver of a trailer in which more than 100 people were traveling lost control while driving at excessive speed. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mexico Section, stated that “immigration alternatives and legal channels are required to avoid tragedies like this one.” Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard announced the creation of an action group against the network of human traffickers involved. Subsequently, more than 40 human rights organizations from Mexico and Central America denounced that this type of situation is due to “the adoption of failed migration policies” and that “the overcrowding in which they traveled shows the adversities faced by [migrants].” They condemned the fact that
defenders, the most recurrent being threats, arbitrary arrests and cruel and inhuman treatment.

In February, community defender Edgar Martín Regalado, a member of the Collective in Defense of Human Rights and Communal Assets of Union Hidalgo, was the victim of an attack. He luckily escaped unharmed. The aggression was recorded just hours after his participation in a press conference in the city of Oaxaca, "where he positioned the actions undertaken by said group (...) against the construction and operation of the Gunaa Sicaru wind farm by the company Electricité de France (EDF)", alerted the organizations that accompany the community.

The worsening of the situation of the press throughout Mexico is also observed in Oaxaca. In January, journalist Jose Ignacio Santiago Martinez, founder and director of Pluma Digital Noticias in the Mixteca, was shot at. In February, journalist Heber Lopez Vasquez was murdered in Salina Cruz, he was director of the "Noticias Web" site and had received death threats in 2019; he wrote regularly about politics and corruption. Oaxaca is considered the second deadliest state in the country to practice journalism, with ten journalists murdered in the state since 2013, according to Article 19.

Among the most vulnerable defenders are those who organize to defend their land and territory. In December, the organization Servicios del Pueblo Mixe A.C. denounced the increase in threats against indigenous territories due to the imposition of megaprojects without consulting or obtaining the consent of the peoples. It affirmed that the interest of the transnationals and the State itself has grown to take over the territories of social property, which generates risks for those who defend the territory, especially because the federal government relies on legal reforms to impose them.

Likewise, in December, the Oaxacan Assembly in Defense of Land and Territory held a press conference "IT IS NOT DEVELOPMENT, IT IS DISPOSSESSION! Indigenous People, Megaprojects and Criminalization in Oaxaca". It spoke out against the installation of megaprojects in Oaxacan territory due to the "serious environmental, social, and political consequences that it brings to the communities that live there." It denounced the problems in the Tehuantepec Isthmus due to the pretense of carrying out megaprojects in indigenous territories without information or consultation. It also denounced the constant violations of the rights of defenders of their land and territory.

Finally, within the framework of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, the Memory to Resist "Neither Forgive nor Forget" protest day was held in the Oaxacan capital to denounce the cases of femicidal violence that, during the current six-year term of office, has claimed the lives of more than 500 women and girls. They pointed to the state government for "its inaction against gender violence and the ineffectiveness of the gender alert issued in 40 municipalities, but implemented through simulation."

GUERRERO: Continued Violence Despite Change of Government

In January, La Montaña Tlachinollan Human Rights Center spoke of the situation in which many sectors of the population of Guerrero find themselves 100 days after the new government of Evelyn Salgado Pineda (of the ruling party, the Regeneration Movement, MORENA) where "there is no hue or color of change." The lack of attention from state and municipal authorities to combat the growing violence in the state, the ravages of the pandemic and the collapse of the family economy has them "on the edge of survival", it said. Despite the high expectations generated by Salgado Pineda's victory, the lack of results has begun to materialize in the anger of certain sectors through roadblocks, marches and protests. Contrary to prompt and satisfactory answers, the bureaucracy continues, the institutions drag out the vices of corruption, continue with the practic-
es of contempt and indifference to the population, the lack of dignified and truthful attention, affirmed the Center. On the other hand, it added that the diagnosis reveals the collusion of local powers with criminal organizations where governability "depends on the pacts signed by the mayors with the turf bosses."

For these dates, the continuity of the repression also began to be pointed out. In January, more than 800 members of the National Guard and Guerrero State Police arrived at the Palo Blanco toll booth "to prevent the fathers and mothers of the 43 disappeared and students from the Ayotzinapa Normal Rural School from protesting there." Tlachinollan reported. For the Committee of Fathers and Mothers of the 43, this action by the government violates their rights to freedom of expression and demonstration. "There are no solid grounds to prevent the mothers and fathers of the 43 from protesting, no harm is caused to third parties, (…), the lives of people are not at risk nor is violence generated with our act of protest, why then cancel and restrict these prerogatives?"

"(The) government is not interested in establishing order or avoiding violence, its objective is to prevent social protest, undermine popular organization and destroy freedom of assembly", they denounced. Faced with the attempt to disperse the movement, the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) asked the Federal Government and Governor Evelyn Salgado Pineda "to refrain from incurring in actions that could put the physical integrity of the relatives of the 43 disappeared students at risk (…) and consequently guarantee their right to peaceful demonstration."

In February, students from the Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa tried to take over the same booth in Palo Blanco again to demand that their 43 disappeared classmates be found alive. However, they were kettled by the police. The balance was two injured students and five more detainees -all released hours later-; The Committee of Fathers and Mothers of the 43 lamented the violent response of the armed forces who "in an unjustified and unnecessary action" and condemned the continuity in the repressive practice against social movements. Tlachinollan lamented that the current governor "has not fostered a meeting with the young student teachers", assuring that "dialogue has been conspicuous by its absence in Guerrero", despite the commissions that have been integrated with groups and movements together with the president of the Republic to deal with the serious situation of forced disappearance.

AMLO, for his part, affirmed that members of organized crime could be infiltrated in the leadership of the Ayotzinapa student movement, for which he called on the students "not to be manipulated" either by organized crime, "or for the other white-collar crime." "I hope that they drop that atti-
tude and that they do not play the game of the right (...) You can fight for principles and ideals, without violence,” he exhorted.

Subsequently, within the framework of the 50th anniversary of the assassination of the guerrilla Genaro Vazquez Rojas, thousands of people, including mothers and fathers of the 43 students, displaced indigenous families, and supportive people, mobilized to demand an end to violence and impunity, among others. Under the surveillance of the National Guard and the state police, the demonstrators, carrying posters of photographs of missing persons and murdered social activists, advanced through the streets of Chilpancingo, the state capital. They denounced the lack of justice in the state and that “the authorities and the current government of Guerrero do not have a specific agenda to face the serious problems in the state.” Vidulfo Rosales, a lawyer from Tlacichinollan, also announced that Guerrero is “a state with gaping wounds from the dirty war, with 99 percent impunity. There are 5,300 missing persons and more than 30 defenders and journalists murdered from 1996 to date.”

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“The state of Guerrero combines a multiplicity of antagonistic and complex conflicts that are added to and intertwined with a series of historical structural flaws, such as social inequality and the consequent violence that has increased in recent years.”

Your Name that I Never Forget - Tlachinollan

The twenty-seventh report on the activities of the La Montaña Tlachinollan Human Rights Center, Your Name that I Never Forget, presents the scenario in which a human rights crisis is developing that has kept the wounds of the Guerrero population open for decades. A crossroads of violence in which various sectors of the population live, particularly the indigenous.

No Man’s Land, Intersecting Violence

The state of Guerrero has a strategic geography. Its borders with Puebla, Mexico State and in particular Morelos, give it access to the center of the country; The Tierra Caliente region is characterized by its agrobusiness and livestock wealth, but also for being a strategic route for the transfer of drugs and the sale of weapons: an area of dispute for rival groups from Guerrero and Michoacan.

Chilpancingo, being the political center, is the place where the interests of those who decide on the seven regions of the state converge. It is the “necessary step” for people who travel from the northern area of Guerrero to the port of Acapulco. This has given criminal groups control of the routes that wind and fork towards the communities of the Sierra to which they have subjugated.

Acapulco boasts great economic power that contrasts with the misery belt on the outskirts: extreme poverty, unemployment, crime and a political power that has widened the inequality gap. For many, Acapulco is “the cemetery of the forgotten.”

According to Tlachinollan, at least 22 organized crime groups are vying for the state of Guerrero. They are not only dedicated to cultivating and moving drugs, but also control the exploitation of natural resources in collusion with mining companies; they control formal and informal businesses in various regions and even “govern” municipalities, forcing the population to abide by their decisions. It mentions that, despite the militarization of the state, neither the National Guard nor the Army enter these areas.

According to data from the Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System (SESNSP) in the state of Guerrero 1,200 murders were recorded during the first nine months of 2021, with the port of Acapulco heading the list of the five most violent of the state.

“The geographical location of the state has been strategic since ancient times to be taken advantage of by different organized crime groups, which currently operate alongside and often in collusion with public institutions, which have used these criminal groups as a private army to guarantee their impunity”, the Tlachinollan report points out.

Ayotzinapa, “The Justice that Distances Itself”

In this context, the levels of violence and human rights violations in the state are not surprising, one of the most emblematic cases being that of Ayotzinapa. September 26th, 2021, marked seven years since the disappearance of the student teachers and their relatives marched in Mexico.
City where dozens of contingents endorsed their support and solidarity for the movement. In turn, Tania Reneaum, executive secretary of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), expressed her recognition and admiration for “keeping this demand alive in a country that soon forgets.”

In this long journey of the fathers and mothers, the IACHR welcomed the establishment of a dialogue with the President of the Republic and the creation of the Special Investigation and Litigation Unit for the Ayotzinapa Case and the Commission for Truth and Access to Justice decreed by the federal government in 2018. Without a doubt, these are advances of the current government that contrast with the stagnation of the searches during the administration of Enrique Peña Nieto. The location of the remains of Cristian Alfonso Rodríguez Telumbre in July 2020 and Jhovani Guerreiro de la Cruz in June 2021 are added to this, with which the “historical truth” fabricated by the then Attorney General’s Office (PGR) was rejected.

The fathers and mothers of the 43 recognized the work carried out by both the Special Prosecutor’s Office and the Presidential Commission chaired by the Undersecretary for Human Rights, Population and Migration Alejandro Encinas, and the independent experts. However, for them it is imperative to break the pact of silence that covers up the participation of the Army in these disappearances because there are data that indicate that different security forces, including the Army, were involved in this massive aggression, as they describe in the report. They believe that there should be no further delay in issuing the 40 arrest warrants pending for several months, nor in the extradition of Tomas Zeron de Lucio, former head of the Criminal Investigation Agency, who led the initial investigation into the disappearance of the student teachers and who is accused of torture.

It seems that justice is distancing itself for Ayotzinapa, dragged out by what analysts consider “a pact of impunity.” Despite the initiatives of the federal government to protect witnesses who give information about the whereabouts of the young people, “no one wants to talk”, the relatives complain. In a Mexico that ranks 60th out of 69 countries evaluated in the Global Impunity Index, and in a state where 96.1% of reported crimes go unpunished, the government continues to owe the entire country the truth about the events that occurred “that bitter night.”

Forced Disappearance: An Omnipresent Historical Phenomenon in the State

Forced disappearance in the state of Guerrero has been omnipresent since what is known as “The Dirty War.” According to the Tlachinollan report, during this period, relatives have documented more than 600 people disappeared. The “Death Flights” threw the bodies into the sea, staining the Pacific Ocean with blood along with the disappearances and murders carried out by the army, the navy and the state police corporations.

“The repression exerted against 800 coconut farmers, on August 20th, 1967, by the army, together with state police and Governor Raymundo Abarca’s gunmen, left a balance of 35 people killed and 150 injured”, Tlachinollan recalls.

The National Search Commission showed in its latest report that from March 15th, 1994, to November 7th, 2021, 98,008 people were declared missing nationwide, while in Guerrero, this figure reaches 3,719 cases.

For its part, the State Commission for the Search for Persons registered 175 missing persons in the first half of 2021, of which 48 were registered in Acapulco and 39 in Chilpancingo. According to the Other Disappeared Collective (Collectivo Los otros Desaparecidos) in Iguala, from November 2014 to mid-June 2021, 243 human bones and fragments have been found in various points on the outskirts of that city. During this time they managed to identify 68 people and 52 of them were handed over to their families.

One of the most recent cases is that of Vicente Suastegui Muñoz, who was deprived of his liberty by three armed men on his way back home on August 5th, 2021. The disappearance of the land defender and member of the Council of Ejidos and Communities Opposed to the La Parota Dam (CECOP) is framed within the decomposition of the police bodies and “this climate of criminal violence that murders and disappears people they classify as enemies, without the authorities carrying out exhaustive investigations to arrest the perpetrators”, stressed Tlachinollan.

In 2017, the General Law on the Matter of Forced Disappearance of Persons, Disappearance Committed by Private Parties was adopted in the same way as the National Search
System for Persons thanks to the shared effort between civil groups and organizations. Although this represents a triumph in regulatory matters, four years after its approval institutional barriers continue to be a challenge to be overcome. The authorities are indifferent to and distant from the victims; they make judgments without knowing the causes of this growing phenomenon. For Tlachinollan, “the search for disappeared persons represents irreparable damage to the families”, they are stigmatized and blamed such that the authorities justify disclaiming responsibility for accompanying and supporting them.

Marco Antonio Suastegui, leader of the CECOP, undertook the search for his brother, Vicente, due to the lack of implementation of a protocol by the authorities. Like many other relatives of the disappeared, Marco Antonio has put his life at risk by having to search on his behalf in highly insecure areas.

A Region of Silence for Environmental Defenders and Journalists

“The disappearance of Vicente is an example that in Mexico there is a crisis of insecurity to preserve the lives of defenders”, states La Montaña Human Rights Center in its report. The document also mentions that the state of Guerrero ranks fourth nationally in the number of attacks against human rights defenders and journalists, a region of silence where “media coverage is not given or avoided, due to the imminent risk that implies accounting for the insecurity, impunity and injustice that prevail.”

The crisis in which the right to free expression finds itself in Mexico is a reflection of what is happening at the local level. In Guerrero, journalists are also victims of municipal authorities who criticize, delegitimize and criminalize them. One case is that of the municipal president of Tlapa de Comonfort who dismissed the work of the journalist Carmen Benitez Garcia and the defender Neil Arias Vittina. These attacks against them occurred a few months before the forced disappearance of defender Arnulfo Ceron Soriano, on October 11th, 2019, who also suffered a campaign of delegitimization and criminalization by the same official.

“The attacks on human rights defenders and journalists are not an unusual practice, but, on the contrary, part of a state malpractice that is evident at the different levels of government, as exemplified by the statements of the President of the Republic Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who continually disqualifies the defense work and discredits the consequences of risk to which they are exposed, sending a message of incompatibility and impunity to the aggressors”, the report states.

Tlachinollan presents the cases of murdered human rights defenders that they have documented between September 2020 and August 2021 in the report. The first was the environmentalist leader of the Los Guajes ejido, Elias Gallegos Coria, and his son, Fredy Gallegos; the last one, that of Guerrero journalist Pablo Morrugas and his bodyguard, this despite the fact that he had been a beneficiary of the Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists since 2016. They also highlighted the case of the Jose Maria Morelos y Pavon Regional Center for the Defense of Human Rights whose members suffered different attacks by organized crime and local authorities for their work accompanying the communities victims of forced displacement.

“There are many pending issues, but even in the darkness of this forgotten Mountain, we know that the demands are legitimate, that our work is peaceful and above all necessary, so the right to defend human rights and the right to information should not cost life, but on the contrary, it is the authorities that must guarantee that our work is carried out in conditions of safety and freedom”, Tlachinollan points out in its report.

“Displace to Rule”

According to the latest report of the Mexican Commission for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights, in 2020 the victims of forced displacement at the national level rose to 9,741, of which 3,952 are concentrated in Guerrero. However, there is still no official census and the Senate has been paralyzing the Federal Law on Forced Displacement for more than a year. In addition, “as it is not classified as a crime in the federal or state codes, the victims are defenseless”, said the Jose Maria Morelos y Pavón Regional Human Rights Center.

The new lines of business in which criminal groups are entering are another cause of this phenomenon. Conflicts with extractivist companies have been aggravated by the influence of criminal groups that are in charge of terrorizing communities by assassinating heads of families to displace their widows and children, seize the forests or rivers that the communities protect.

Entrepreneurs have made use of these criminal organizations and the support of federal officials responsible for protecting the environment and state and municipal
FOCUS

authorities who join forces to conduct business under the protection of power and continue with the looting of natural resources. During the online forum Latin American Experiences of Forced Displacement and Prevention Measures, Tlachinollan mentioned that the control of organized crime, together with authorities, private companies and the public force “systematically transgresses human rights without any consequence” and “gives a glimpse of how state players and criminal groups operate in a mining region, where the owners of the land have to bow to the macroeconomic interests of transnational companies.”

In the Sierra region, the cultivation and movement of drugs aroused the greed of criminal groups that have displaced dozens of families to take control of the routes. In other areas such as the Center, North, Tierra Caliente, Acapulco and Costa Grande there are also cases of internal forced displacement.

The state government has only partially complied with the demands for housing and the construction of a school, leaving aside the issue of security and the dismantling of the armed groups that patrol their communities and are part of organized crime. In addition, displaced people suffer from medical neglect in times of pandemic, they do not have access to medicines and when a family member dies and they want to return to their community to bury them, it is the criminal group that controls the municipal capital who decides whether they can enter or not. This shows that the chances of return are close to zero.

Femicidal Violence, Executioner of Guerrero Women

According to official figures from the Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System, of the 626 femicides registered in Mexico in 2020, ten occurred in Guerrero; 91 intentional homicides of women; 1,925 cases of family violence; 214 case reports of alleged crimes of rape; as well as 4,262 emergency calls related to incidents of violence against women.

From September 2020 to October 2021, they documented 26 femicides in different municipalities of the state. According to the follow-up that the Center has given, in only 20% of the cases have those responsible been prosecuted and a minimum percentage has reached convictions.

The victims of gender violence in the state are many, but they are, above all, girls. When forced marriages occur, the lives of girls are cruelly truncated “leaving disastrous messages within the indigenous communities: domination is exercised by men and the role of women is to subordinate themselves. Any dissent is paid for with life”, says the Tlachinollan report. For some, “the custom that existed before has been perverted, (...) Now everything is to be fixed with money. (...) Women are not merchandise, no matter how obedient and respectful we are of the customs of the people”, the testimony of a young woman in the report states. In many cases, the lack of close support networks and the remoteness of the communities in which the women live, empowers the perpetrators to commit these acts without witnesses to account for the facts.

Indigenous women are especially vulnerable due to the absence of institutions. There is an environment of normalized and dehumanized violence that is coupled with the ineffectiveness of the justice system that maintains these crimes in impunity. Despite the fact that, since June 2017, ten municipalities in Guerrero have had a Declaration of Gender Violence against Women (AVGM) and a second one for compared tort in June 2020, there have been no effective
results to reverse this violence. The hundreds of cases of femicide violence show the indifference and inefficiency of the institutions. The investigation protocol for femicide is not applied, there are delays in investigations and discriminatory practices continue.

**Guerrero, “Free and Sovereign” State**

During the electoral contest in June 2021, the National Electoral Institute (INE) registered a total of 1,465,543 votes in the state of Guerrero, which represents a participation of 57.83% of the electorate. The candidate for the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA), Evelyn Salgado Pineda, won the contest with a total of 643,814 votes. However, contrary to expectations, one hundred days after her inauguration, La Montaña Human Rights Center showed in its report that under the MORENA government “the institutions drag out the vices of corruption, continue with the practices of contempt and indifference to the population, the lack of dignified and truthful attention.”

The election of Evelyn Salgado took place on a stage where the backdrop was the map of violence and insecurity in Guerrero. In this scenario, organized crime groups are leading a struggle for control and territorial expansion while the authorities play the role of allies, Tlachinollan evidenced. Guerrero is one of the states where “the intervention of organized crime became more evident.” Through threats to the candidates and/or their families, the criminal groups forced them to desist from their intention to govern and in other cases, they supported and imposed a particular candidate, said Animal Politico.

For La Montaña Tlachinollan Human Rights Center, in addition to declaring a frontal fight against impunity, this government has the challenges of addressing the great legislative deficit in the state; care for victims of serious human rights violations; reverse poverty rates and institutional abandonment. For this, it is necessary to purge the institutions in charge of security and the administration of justice.

“The people of Guerrero have always been up for the fight and have never allowed themselves to be defeated in the face of so many atrocities, on the contrary, they are willing to fight at all times to free themselves from the chains of a political system that only uses their vote to elevate people who have betrayed and defrauded them. This new political configuration is to promote substantive changes that place the citizen at the center of political action”, the report mentions. Much of it aims to highlight their processes and commitments, their dignity and resilience.
“I am convinced that we can look at Chiapas again with hope if we manage to come together from all sectors, building a society in which there is a place and peace and a future and harmony for all.”

Friar Gonzalo Ituarte Verduzco

Talking about human rights in Chiapas, and especially the defense of indigenous peoples’ rights, it is impossible not to evoke the great work of Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia. His legacy remains to this day a benchmark and a source of inspiration for those who walk in the struggle for the dignity of peoples.

Jtatic Samuel was not alone on his path. One of his great companions was the Dominican friar Gonzalo Ituarte Verduzco, with whom he shared ideals and who was awarded the Fray Bartolome de Las Casas Medal last December in recognition of “his extensive experience and vision in the peace-building processes in various areas and his accompaniment in different events in Chiapas for more than 40 years.”

In the ceremony that took place at the Daniel Zebadua Theater in San Cristobal de Las Casas, Fray Gonzalo Ituarte gave a heartfelt speech in which he began by recalling the beginnings of his work in Chiapas together with Bishop Samuel Garcia.

“When in the 20th century (...) we arrived in Chiapas, we saw that the Indians were dying before their time, we saw that the marginalization, racism, isolation and exploitation of the Indians had no justification, but we also saw the peoples organizing themselves, particularly after the Indigenous Congress of 1974, and we also saw some authorities and institutions making an effort to transform this unjust situation; and civil and political organizations emerged in the face of the many challenges that this reality posed; DESMI, INAREMAC, CHILTAK and many more were moving there.”

He went on to describe how they were responding to the context and the needs that it demanded, which led them to the creation of civil society organizations that continue to work today and are part of his legacy.

“And we met in Diocesan Assemblies to discern the paths. And the women took the floor and organized themselves in the Diocesan Women’s Coordination (...) And we saw the irruption of tens of thousands of Guatemalan refugees, and we recognized them as sisters and brothers, and our conscience awakened more; and then Don Samuel spoke of the Rights of the Poor. And along the way we learned to value the perspective of Human Rights and Jtatic Samuel moved us to create the Fray Bartolome de Las Casas Human Rights Center; and it was with brave people from this city that he was able to start this project, which is still alive and serving. And we saw emergency situations and we responded with Caritas de San Cristobal; and given the situation of indigenous girls and boys in this city, we went with Melel Xojobal; and faced with the uprising of the EZLN we put ourselves in the middle with the National Commission of Intermediation; and in the face of the unresolved armed conflict and the continued conflict in Chiapas and the country, Services and Assessment for Peace was necessary; and before the numerous migrants we concur with Pastoral Service for Migrants.”

He continued with a harsh description of the current context, with an x-ray of what is happening in Chi-
apar that many see, but few venture to break down in such a timely manner.

“In this 21st century, after a brief absence, I return to Chiapas and see it from the window of San Cristóbal de Las Casas and what do I see? I see:

Fear
Insecurity
Violence
Dispute over urban territories with armed groups
Motorcycle gangs and young people tempted to join the crime
Organized and disorganized crime; and also politicized crime
And gunshots and kidnappings and threats and the murder of a prosecutor and good people
And dispossession of property
Destruction of wetlands
Pollution of rivers and dried up springs
Devastation of forests and mountains

A thirsty city, while the deep water reservoir becomes a commodity
A city threatened with death if it does not act quickly and well.
I see a fractured society,
Raped women
I see victims of human trafficking
I find abuse of working girls and boys
A growing generation gap
The call of Vice Town with clubs and canteens
Traffic and misfortunes due to drugs and drug trafficking
I also see Dispersed Organizations
Mistrust of institutions and authorities
Political parties that split
Sterile consumerism
Individualism that isolates
Anarchic and suicidal urban growth
Rejected and criminalized migrants.”

“I see criminals who believe that they will not be arrested
I see threats, defamation and kidnappings against Human Rights Defenders and against Ecologists who defend the environment.
Fear of going out on the road, because of the blockades, extortions and assaults.”

After detailing the convulsive reality in all its dimensions, he continued his speech with a message of hope in which he spoke about the opportunities he sees to restore peace and make Chiapas a place where life is possible.

“I have hope and I believe that it is possible to walk in harmony, yielding to the common interest, so that the particular interest is possible.”

“It is clear that there will be no tourism if there is no tranquility, that there will be no life if there is no water for everyone, there will be no trust if the law is not applied with justice, there will be no social cohesion if it is not discovered that this city, (and municipality, and Chiapas) belongs to everyone.”

Finally, he addressed the representatives of civil society, academia and the three levels of government who attended the delivery of this recognition, making a call to find a way to work together and overcome the situation in which the state of Chiapas finds itself engulfed.

“In fact, my invitation is to assume the serious reality that this municipality and our State is experiencing and call on all of those present here to join forces and wills to overcome this situation and make it possible for this city and its rural communities, and the entire State of Chiapas to be a space of peace, where people can live, where the common good comes before private interests, without underestimating them.”

“The fundamental task is to look for new answers to obtain good results and not repeat the previous recipes that led us to this very serious circumstance.”

“It is in our hands, thank you very much.”

With this brief but profound speech it is possible to understand the complexity of the reality of Chiapas, a history marked by dispossession, exploitation, marginalization, racism, classism and violence towards indigenous peoples. But also, a story of struggle and resistance and in which endearing characters such as Jiatric Samuel and Friar Gonzalo Ituarte Verduzco have accompanied have left their mark.
SIPAZ ACTIVITIES

From mid-November 2021 to mid-February 2022

INTERNATIONAL PRESENCE AND ACCOMPANIMENT

CHIAPAS

Gender
- In November, within the framework of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, we were present at various activities that took place in San Cristobal de Las Casas, including the press conference “Rage is not enough, we want justice: violence against girls, adolescents and women in Chiapas.”
- In December, we accompanied the march that took place in San Cristobal de Las Casas to demand justice for the femicide of Dr. Daniela Toledo in the same city.

Internal Forced Displacement
- In December, we accompanied representatives of families from Banavil, municipality of Tenejapa, displaced since 2011, to a meeting with state authorities.
- Prisoners
- In February, within the framework of the follow-up of recommendations issued by the United Nations (UN) Working Group on Arbitrary Detentions, we accompanied the visit of authorities and the subsequent dialogue to review the prevailing conditions in San Cristobal de Las Casas prison.

Indigenous Peoples
- In November, we were present at the online International Conference “Right to self-determination of indigenous peoples: The struggle of the Tseltal people of Chilon and Sitala (Chiapas)” organized by the Due Process of Law Foundation (DPFL) and the Center for Indigenous Rights (CEDIAC).
- In November, we accompanied the event that took place in Chilon in the framework of the 4th anniversary of the Community Government Council of that municipality, a structure created by the Tseltal people and one of the expressions of their struggle for self-determination and autonomy.
- In December, we participated in a space for analysis and design of responses of their struggle for self-determination and public interest.

Land and territory
- In November, twelve years after the murder of environmentalist Mariano Abarca, we attended the award ceremony for the award that bears his name to Las Abejas de Acteal Civil Society Organization, in recognition of its peaceful struggle in defense of land, territory and life that they have continued despite the violence in the region.

Migration
- In December, we visited the “Casa Betania Santa Martha” shelter for migrants in Salto de Agua and, together with the Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Human Rights Center, we met with different federal, state and municipal authorities in order to stop the threats to which its members have been subjected.

Events
- In November, we participated in the assembly of the Believing People in San Cristobal de Las Casas.
- In December, we attended a Meeting of Young Peacebuilders convened by the Commission for Reconciliation and Community Unity (CORECO) and the Whitaker Initiative for Peace and Development (WPDI Chiapas).
- In December, we attended the online discussion “Promoting Non-violence and Just Peace in the Church and the World”, convened by Pax Christi International.

INFORMATION AND TRAINING TOWARDS ACTION

PUBLIC RELATIONS
- In December, we met with members of a Catalan Committee that visited Mexico and included the participation of an MEP, a member of the Catalan Parliament and members of the organization for the defense of human rights, Taula per Mèxic.

EDUCATION FOR PEACE
- In November, we participated with a presentation in the online meeting for the community that works on Non-Violent Civil Protection and Accompaniment, organized by the Non-violence Peace Force, among others.
- In December, we facilitated a space for analysis with the Mesoamerican Voices (Voces Mesoamericanas) work team in the framework of its annual evaluation and strategic planning for 2022.

NETWORKING
- We attended the bimonthly meetings of the Network for Peace, a space for action and reflection.
- In December and January, we participated in a meeting with representatives of the pastoral areas that are part of the Follow-up Commission of the Congress of Mother Earth, a component of the social pastoral of the diocese of San Cristobal de Las Casas.
- In January, we participated with a presentation in the event organized by the Global Platform for the Prevention of Armed Conflicts (GPPAC) and Catholic Relief Services within the framework of the international conference “@PeaceCon10: Covid, Climate and Conflict – Being Prepared for the Challenges of a Troubled World.”