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US Policies in Mexico Have Made Bad Situation Worse

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Missing Mexican students are collateral damage of drug-war capitalism
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The disappearance and presumed murder of 43 Mexican students from the rural teacher's college in Ayotzinapa on Sept. 26 has exposed Mexico's inability to contain the rising tide of drug-fueled violence plaguing the country. Within days, a search team looking for the students unearthed mass graves that contained the remains of 30 others, barely eliciting a response from officials for whom the macabre discovery of clandestine graves has become all too common.

The lack of answers about the fate of missing students has unleashed massive protests and discontent across Mexico and abroad, as enraged demonstrators direct their fury at systemic and entrenched problems: drug-trafficking violence, rampant corruption, neoliberal economic reforms and pervasive poverty and inequality. The tension poses the most critical challenge yet for the presidency of Enrique Peña Nieto, but this tragedy is not a crisis for Mexico alone. The carnage south of our border is closely intertwined with U.S. security and trade policies that have intensified rather than stanched the flow of blood in Mexico.

The whole episode is emblematic of Mexico's corruption, impunity and weak democratic institutions, with elected officials and security forces colluding with the drug cartels. In this case, the students were apparently abducted by local police on direct order from Iguala's mayor and handed over to the local Guerreros Unidos gang, which has close ties to the mayor's wife, who claim to have killed them, burned the bodies and dumped the ashes in Cocula. And though nearby, the military evinced indifference to the students' plight.

Despite these entanglements, however, the U.S. continues to engage in a bi-national strategy with Mexico to combat drug trafficking, entrusting the very

politicians and security forces whose ties to criminal enterprises are readily apparent.

In the last six years alone, Washington spent $3 billion on the Mérida Initiative, a border security, counter-narcotics and counterterrorism program established by the George W. Bush administration in 2008. The U.S. also funnels millions of dollars through the Department of Defense to train state security forces. In 2006, Peña Nieto's predecessor Felipe Calderón declared war on the cartels, and the human cost has been staggering. During his six-year tenure from 2006 to 2012, 83,000 people were killed and at least another 26,000 disappeared. The death toll has now reached 100,000.

Mexico's U.S.-backed anti-drug policies are inherently counterproductive. The criminal networks associated with the illicit and unregulated drug trade are intrinsically violent, and dismantling one cartel does little to curb overall drug trafficking and violence. Instead, interdiction and drug-related arrests can escalate violence by creating power vacuums that spur fragmentation, decentralization and competition among cartels for the freed-up market share.

Washington has been virtually silent about the Iguala tragedy and stubbornly unwilling to reflect on how its own policies play a role in the bloodshed.

In September, the Global Commission on Drug Policy, a panel of international political leaders, issued a report deeming the so-called "war on drugs" an abject failure. The Commission concluded that the current global drug prohibition regime has fueled the flow and profitability of illicit substances. Moreover, the campaign had undermined human rights, development and security — while failing to direct funds toward ameliorating the overlapping and intractable health and social problems engendered by drug consumption. The United Nations has estimated that public health initiatives for drug-related programs would cost $3.2 billion. This figure pales in comparison to the $15 billion the U.S. government spends annually on counter-narcotics programs.

The militarized policing that accompanies the war on drugs has also been catastrophic for human rights. “Soldiers involved in policing are notoriously unable to relinquish the military paradigm,” a UN Special Rapporteur, said after visiting Mexico last year. “The primary objective of the military is to subdue the enemy through the use of superior force.” The Rapporteur called for a human rights-based approach that focuses on the prevention, investigation and prosecution of crimes through a robust justice system, with force employed only as a last resort.

The human toll of militarization has been painfully evident. In September, Amnesty International reported that allegations of torture in Mexico increased 600 percent from 2003 to 2013. And last year, Human Rights Watch reported 250 cases of disappearances in Mexico during Calderon’s rein, with the government implicated in 149 of them, and these are just the tip of the iceberg. And in June, the Army executed 22 civilians in Tlatlaya. Prosecutors coerced witnesses to exonerate the soldiers, threatening to rape the three women and beating two of them.

Beefed up state security extends beyond counter-narcotics efforts, and includes economic objectives that journalist Dawn Paley has dubbed “drug war capitalism.” The incentives include assuring foreign investors of the safety of their investments, supporting privatization, and enriching military contractors and arms manufacturers. Militarized security also facilitates the political repression of groups resisting historical exploitation and neoliberal policies, including activists, trade unions, teachers, and indigenous and campesino communities fighting dispossession, such as those in the impoverished state of Guerrero that is home to the Ayotzinapa teachers’ school. In fact, reports suggest that the vanished students may have been targeted in part because of their poor, rural left-wing school’s activism against regressive educational reforms.

Mexico’s war on drugs also plays out against the backdrop of U.S. trade policy. For example, the North American Free Trade Agreement has had a devastating effect on the country: Depressing wages, displacing small farmers, increasing

migration to the U.S. and exacerbating poverty, which in turn fuels continued activism against the government.

The humanitarian crisis in Mexico spills back over our borders as well. Since the escalation of Mexico's drug war in 2006, the government's inability to stem the ensuing violence has forced many to flee for their lives. Applications for political asylum in the U.S. rose fourfold during that period, though Mexican refugees are rarely granted relief. Yet Washington has been virtually silent about the Iguala tragedy and stubbornly unwilling to reflect on how its own policies play a role in the bloodshed.

A short video of the students before they were abducted provides a visceral and haunting reminder that they are not faceless statistics. Instead of continuing to pour taxpayer money into state-sponsored repression, corruption and narco-violence in Mexico, Barack Obama's administration should heed the advice of the emerging global consensus on the failure of the current militarized drug-prohibition framework. It is time to re-think the war on drugs, end the Mérida Initiative and adopt an enlightened and sensible policy that will ease the mounting death toll in Mexico and diminish the damage at home.

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