

MEXICO - De Facto Amnesty for "Dirty War" Human Rights Violators (Diego Cevallos, IPS)

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03/002/06 - IPS - The commitment made by Mexican President Vicente Fox to bring to justice those responsible for the torture and murder of activists and dissidents in the late 1960s and 1970s remains an empty promise, and there is apparently little interest among his possible successors in taking up the issue.

"Fox's promise was a lie, he has not kept it and now it will never be fulfilled," Alicia Camacho, a torture survivor and spokeswoman for the Union of Mothers of the Disappeared in Culiacán, told IPS.

"The trouble is, many of those who are guilty are still in positions of political power, and nobody wants to touch them," she said. Camacho, a historian, was held in a clandestine prison in 1977, where she was beaten and abused by state security agents in spite of being pregnant.

With just 11 months to go before Fox's term comes to an end, analysts and activists are discouraged with regard to the possibility of clarifying pending cases from the so-called "dirty war" against dissidents - mainly student activists and members of armed guerrilla groups opposed to the governments of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which governed Mexico for 71 years.

A total of 532 cases of forced disappearance have been documented from the late 1960s and the 1970s.

According to Carlos Gómez, director of Amnesty International in Mexico, "the president's promise has not been fulfilled, and there seems to be little interest in the subject among the presidential candidates and their political parties."

In its four years of work, the Special Prosecutor's Office for Social and Political Movements of the Past has only ordered three arrests. All other requests for prosecuting suspects who are still alive are bogged down in legal problems and have run up against astute defence lawyers who predict that the efforts of the Office will fail completely.

In other countries, democratic governments have promoted the creation of Truth Commissions to shed light on periods of state repression. In contrast, Mexico opted for this prosecuting body, created in 2001 and attached to the Attorney General's Office, with powers to bring legal cases.

"But the results show that there was no real political will," the head of the local branch of the London-based rights watchdog Amnesty International told IPS.

According to Professor Sergio Aguayo, "Fox's six-year term is coming to an end without the government fulfilling its promise to deliver justice, truth, and compensation to the victims of the dirty war. Instead, it has granted a de facto amnesty for those who violated human rights in the past."

When Fox took office in December 2000, he pledged to investigate the dirty war, punish those responsible, and compensate the victims. As the first president in seven decades from a party other than the PRI, his words brought hope.

The wave of repression that took place under PRI governments included not only the forced disappearance of hundreds of activists, but also several high-profile massacres of student protesters.

In 1968, hundreds of students were killed when the police and army opened fire on demonstrators in Tlatelolco square in Mexico City, and in June 1971 a group of paramilitaries killed dozens of student

protesters, also in the capital.

Camacho, 50, one of the survivors of the brutal crackdown on government opponents, said she clearly remembers her arrest on Aug. 19, 1977 in her native Sinaloa, a state in northwestern Mexico whose capital is Culiacán.

She said she was taken by police to an improvised secret jail in a private house, where she was held for two months, blindfolded and suffering abuse and torture. She was eight months pregnant at the time of her arrest, and gave birth to her son in captivity.

Her husband, a member of a clandestine leftwing organisation, was killed by the police.

"All the information in my case, the names, places and dates, was handed over to the Special Prosecutor's Office, but nothing has been done," Camacho complained.

The repression was the other face of the PRI, which claimed to be revolutionary, supported socialist Cuba, called for a new international economic order and gave asylum to hundreds of people persecuted at that time by military dictatorships in South America.

The Special Prosecutor's Office has so far brought about the imprisonment of Miguel Nazar, director of the now-defunct Federal Security Agency in the 1970s and 1980s. He was accused of abducting a person in 1975 whose whereabouts are still unknown. A lower-ranking policeman is also in custody, and another is wanted but still at large.

However, others who are also facing charges, like former president Luis Echeverría (1970-1976), have so far avoided prison through the use of legal maneuvers.

Among the presidential candidates most likely to succeed Fox in the July elections, the subject of the dirty war has been notable for its absence.

Andrés López Obrador, the candidate of the left-leaning Party of the Democratic Revolution, who leads the polls, declared last year that he was in favour of clarifying the crimes of the past, but did not explain how that would be done if he is elected.

The second-most popular candidate, Felipe Calderón of the governing National Action Party, supported Fox's policy in the past.

But PRI candidate Roberto Madrazo went so far as to say that discussing the dirty war is a "smokescreen" that can "endanger our institutions, and, therefore, the state itself."

Since the official start of the election campaign in January, the issue has not been mentioned.

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