

# Report from Guerrero: The real criminals



Thousands March for Safe Return of Disappeared Youth

Saturday, Oct. 18. Acapulco: Shops are closed, with metal shutters pulled tight over the storefronts. Government employees have been given the day off and warned to stay inside. Schools are out for the day, to the delight of the children. The new car agency has even removed the models from the show floor.

Acapulco, the Pearl of the Pacific, looks like it's in hurricane mode. But there was no hurricane Friday. The government ordered the city lockdown to scare people off the march. Regardless of the campaign to create fear among the local population, close to ten thousand people marched to demand the safe return of 43 education students, forcibly disappeared by local police on Sept. 26 in the nearby city of Iguala.

Acapulco is the [most violent city](#) in the nation, and murder and extortion are everyday events. One resident who defied official warnings and joined the march told me, "You've seen those movies about the gangster days and Al Capone, with shoot-outs in the street and pay-offs to the cops? That's us. I used to think that only happened in movies."

But in a city where violence has become commonplace, for the city government the presence of citizens demonstrating for justice was the only threat to be reckoned with.

"Due to the protest, municipal authorities decided to suspend work and close offices, to avoid exposing personnel," read the local *Novedades Acapulco* newspaper Friday. Municipal

spokesperson Ricardo Castillo made the rounds of radio and television stations warning residents to remain inside their homes because of the possibility of violence.

"This is a peaceful march. Walk in your contingent, everyone behind the front banner. Men line up on the outside, women inside." March organizers gave specific instructions to the thousands of teachers, students, local residents and regional grassroots organizations, including indigenous community police. The protesters followed them to the letter and despite high emotions at the assassinations and disappearance of the students, the march proceeded without incident. Even the graffiti was reserved for OXXO stores and politicians' propaganda.

Two demands dominated the march: safe return of the missing students, and the resignation of the state governor, Angel Aguirre. Aguirre is blamed for the impunity that characterizes the state, a "cemetery of organized crime", where the surrounding hills hide hundreds of bodies and body parts in mass graves. Members of the criminal gang, Guerreros Unidos, implicated in the disappearances originally led investigators to the supposed grave of the students, but the Attorney General announced this week that the semi-burned bodies are not those of the students. The fact that everyone has forgotten to even ask whose bodies were in the graves gives an idea of how "normal" mass graves and unidentified bodies have become in this part of the country.

The false warnings of violent protest are just the latest in years, if not decades, of government efforts to criminalize the students of the rural teaching college, Ayotzinapa. Casting a permanent image of dangerous youth threatening law-abiding citizens is part of a strategy to isolate the students.

Now they are the victims of police who opened fire and murdered six people, abducting and disappearing 43 with the participation of Guerreros Unidos, an organized crime gang. But still, the press and government officials continue to paint the young people as the problem. Within local society, residents have grown soused to media and politicians' harangues against the students for commandeering buses and blocking roads, that many will tell you privately that they believe the dead and missing got what they deserved.

But thousands more don't agree. The movement to support the students and hold all levels of government accountable for the crime is growing. As the federal government insists that organized crime is behind the disappearance with just a few corrupt politicians, at the march not one of the chants or slogans or demands was directed at organized crime. All laid responsibility at the feet of the government, primarily the state government.

First, because citizens can't make demands of organized crime. Criminals are criminals. It is the responsibility of the state to protect its citizens, which in Guerrero is clearly not happening. Second, because the protesters view the drug cartels and the state as partners.

"Sicarios, policia--la misma porquería" read one sign. (Hit men, police--the same trash"). The mayor of Iguala implicated in the attack on the students of Ayotzinapa and currently on the run, allegedly has tied through his wife and friends to the local crime gang. He is accused of knocking

off people who cross him, notably grassroots leader, Arturo Hernandez Cardona, two years ago who he is said to have murdered in person.

This also is not the first time that the governments' hostility toward Ayotzinapa has led to violence. In 2011 police assassinated two students at a roadblock in a crime for which no one was held accountable.

The media and political push to blame the victims is particularly surreal when compared to the attitude of the state towards the real criminals. The state Congress decided yesterday--three weeks after the crime--to withdraw immunity for the mayor, José Luis Abarca. It's not even clear if the federal government has issued an arrest order for him despite his obvious involvement in the crime from the outset.

Now Abarca is long gone, on the lam and with a 21-day lead on police who apparently have little interest in capturing him. One can't help but doubt that justice will prevail.