Opinion

News



A memorial for the 43 Mexican students who were disappeared in 2014 is seen in Aguascalientes, Mexico, in September 2018. (Wikimedia Commons/Luis Alvaz)



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You may remember the kidnapping and presumed murder of 43 Mexican students in 2014 in Guerrero, Mexico. Local police who attacked the students and took them into custody were carrying German Heckler & Koch weapons and U.S. Colt AR-6530 rifles. The local police were also carrying Italian Berettas, but it is not known if they were imported legally from the U.S. or elsewhere or if they were smuggled in.

While the investigation is ongoing, evidence indicates that police used these small arms to murder the 43 Mexican students.

(Gun smuggling is another story. When my community, Loretto, leads border investigation groups, we carry clothes, shoes and backpacks across the border to aid deportees. Our packages are virtually never checked. Guns cross the border just as easily.)

The Mexican army is the only authorized arms dealer in Mexico. The army controls foreign imports, local manufacture, sales and exports. Mexico has strict laws regulating civilian gun ownership. Only one retail store, located in Mexico City, is permitted to sell to civilians.

The Mexican army provides local police with the arms deemed necessary. The Colts were exported from the U.S by Colt, a U.S. firm, under a U.S. export license. They went to the Mexican army, which provided them to the Guerrero police. Those police also obtained the Heckler & Koch and Beretta weapons from the army, through a license.

But German law prohibits export of German weapons to states that violate human rights. The Guerrero police have a bad human rights record and they fall within the category of human rights violators Germany refuses to sell guns to. Since 2010, Germany does not license gun sales to Mexico.

So here's the astonishing action Germany took. German federal commissioner Christoph Strässer apologized on behalf of Germany to the families of the 43 missing students over the apparent use of German weapons. Moreover, Germany criminally prosecuted Heckler & Koch officials for the exports to Mexico. Germany has filed charges against another gun company, Sig Sauer, which shipped weapons from its

German manufacturing site to Sig Sauer in the United States, which then illegally re-exported them to Colombia.

Laws denying small arms to human rights abusers — and state apologies when those arms transfers do happen — that's diplomacy in action. The United States and Italy had no comment.

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However, a letter is circulating in Congress to limit arms exports to Mexico. While almost every House Democrat has signed on to legislation requiring stronger background checks for gun purchases in the U.S., controls on weapons exports are few and far between and Congress has been reluctant to call for them.

Small arms exports are a huge and troubling issue, and it's difficult to find ways to resist these gun transfers. I learned about gun traffic with Mexico from a workshop led by John Lindsay-Poland at the School of the Americas Watch protest in Nogales, Arizona. It's taken me a couple of months to chew on the information and get enough of an understanding to write about it.

But now I've learned that this congressional letter is circulating. We can ask our representatives to sign this letter.

[Loretto Sr. Mary Ann McGivern works with people who have felony convictions and advocates for criminal justice. She lives in St. Louis.]