News



Demonstrators and students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Normal School, a rural teachers college for young men in the southern Mexican state of Guerrero, protest in Mexico City Sept. 25, 2024, ahead of the 10th anniversary of a Sept. 26, 2014, evening attack when 43 students from the school disappeared south of the city of Iguala. (OSV News/Quetzalli Nicte-Ha, Reuters)



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Mexico City — September 27, 2024
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Cristina Bautista has never stopped searching for her son, who was among the 43 students who disappeared in a 2014 attack that has never been solved. She searches for two simple reasons: No one else will do it and the government investigations repeatedly run into roadblocks — often owing to a lack of political will.

"These 10 years were a simulation of looking for our children," Bautista told OSV News. "If it were real, for real, our children would not be absent for these 10 years. It's not knowing anything about our children."

The Sept. 26, 2014, attack on the students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Normal School, a rural teachers college for young men, shocked Mexico, which had become seemingly inured to grizzly stories of drug cartel violence. Ten years later, the case remains in the realm of impunity, despite widespread societal outrage, parental searches and Mexican and international investigations.

Ayotzinapa Rural Normal School is part of a network of teacher-training colleges established decades ago to bring education to rural areas. Over time, the schools have become deeply involved with social issues.

The night the students disappeared they had commandeered buses in the city of Iguala — located 190 miles south of Mexico City in the country's heroin-producing heartland — and had planned to travel to the capital for an annual protest against a previous atrocity: the 1968 attack on students on the eve of the Summer Olympics, according to a government truth commission and international investigations. But

their buses were attacked by police, who handed the students over to the Guerreros Unidos drug cartel.

The anniversary offered a rude reminder of the power and impunity of drug cartels, along with the collusion of politicians and police with criminal groups. It also showed the lack of political will to resolve one of the country's most notorious crimes. For the parents of the missing students, there's only one question.

"What happened to our children?" Bautista said. "That's what we want to know."

The initial news of the attack brought Mexicans from all socioeconomic classes into the streets in protest, shouting, "It was the state" and "They were taken alive, we want them back alive."

They also protested the initial government investigation, which posited the students were kidnapped and taken to a garbage dump, where their bodies were burned in an inferno. It's a version of events, then-Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam called, "The historic truth."

The investigation under President Enrique Peña Nieto, who left office in 2018, was largely based on torturing suspects, according to outside investigators. The military was also uncooperative.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, however, pledged to revive the case. He personally met with the parents of the 43 students during his successful 2018 campaign, where, Bautista recalled, "he promised to clarify the case (and) we had faith and hope in him that we would get to the truth."

López Obrador formed a truth commission shortly after taking office in December 2018. He also appointed a special prosecutor and international investigators were also invited to return.

"There was clear political will," said Santiago Aguirre, director of the Jesuit-sponsored Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center in Mexico City. "There were advances."

The truth commission released a report in 2022, calling the attacks "a state crime." It also discovered the students had been monitored by the police and military from the moment they left the Ayotzinapa school — some 75 miles south of Iguala — and during the attack, but failed to intervene. The commission didn't know the students'

whereabouts, but considered it unlikely they were still alive.

But the case subsequently stalled, with the special prosecutor suddenly resigning. Lawyers for the families alleged the investigation collided with Mexico's military, which has become one of the president's key allies throughout his administration.

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The independent prosecutor for Ayotzinapa "found evidence of the level of Mexican authorities corruption and in particular the links between parts of the army and narcotics traffickers," Aguirre told OSV News. "We at the Centro Pro believe that given the choice of supporting the victims or sticking with the military, the president and the government chose the latter and that explains why the case is not resolved."

International investigators, meanwhile, allege that the military disobeyed presidential orders to open its archives. They left the country in 2023, saying, "It's impossible to continue."

López Obrador insisted, "There's no impunity," while saying that the case advanced thanks to the armed forces.

The president later took aim at lawyers for the students' families, including Centro Pro, a human rights organization. He verbally attacked Centro Pro on multiple occasions in his morning press conference, alleging it was "not what it was before" — referencing Centro Pro's long history of accompanying victims of violence and confronting state actors such as the military.

He also insisted the Ayotzinapa families "are being manipulated by conservative groups from the right, supported by foreign governments that want to do us damage, politically speaking." He made the comments in March 2024, resorting to his usual word for supposed opponents — "conservative."

"This is undoubtedly due to the fact that we have not remained silent in our remarks about the persistence of impunity, violence and cover-up by the army," Centro Pro said in a December 2023 response to López Obrador. "Our work, together with other respected civil society organizations, has been to defend the interests and rights of families, putting the victims at the center."

Parents of the missing students backed their representatives after the president's attacks, including Centro Pro.

"Thanks to them, the government cannot deceive us, can't deliver a body that isn't one of our children," Bautista said.

López Obrador leaves office Sept. 30 with an approval rating topping 70%, according to some polls. His popularity and repeated attacks on the parents' representatives has diminished some of the support he had received until 2022, according to observers.

The president has said that he hopes his successor, Claudia Sheinbaum, would continue the investigation.

"I made a commitment to them to look for them until we found the young people, we worked on that all the time, we did not progress as we would have liked but it is not a closed case," he said in a Sept. 25 letter to the families.

The families have repeatedly expressed disappointment with López Obrador, saying in a July letter, "You have lied to us, You have deceived and betrayed us."