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MEXICO'S DISAPPEARED

The Enduring Cost of a Crisis Ignored

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The Enduring Cost of a Crisis Ignored

When Enrique Peña Nieto took office in December 2012, he inherited a country reeling from an epidemic of drug violence. The “war on drugs” launched by his predecessor, Felipe Calderón, had not only failed to reduce violence, but also led to a dramatic increase in human rights violations.

Throughout most of his presidency, Calderón denied abuses had occurred and failed to take adequate steps to ensure they were prosecuted. That responsibility now falls to President Enrique Peña Nieto. And nowhere is it more urgent than in the crime of disappearances: where people have been unlawfully taken against their will and their fate is still unknown.

Mexico's Disappeared documents nearly 250 “disappearances.” In 149 of these cases, evidence suggests that these were enforced disappearances, carried out with the participation of state agents.

In virtually all of the cases documented by Human Rights Watch, authorities failed to promptly and thoroughly search for the disappeared person, instead blaming the victim and passing the responsibility to investigate onto families. The limited investigative steps prosecutors took were undermined by delays, errors, and omissions. These lapses only exacerbate the suffering of victims’ families, for whom not knowing what happened to their loved ones is a source of perpetual anguish.

Another path is possible. In the state of Nuevo León, responding to pressure from victims’ families and human rights defenders, prosecutors have broken with a pattern of inaction and begun to seriously investigate a select group of disappearances. While progress thus far has been limited, it is an encouraging first step.

Ultimately, enforced disappearances are a national problem, and the success of state-level efforts will depend in large measure on whether the federal government is willing and able to do its part. If, like its predecessor, the Peña Nieto administration fails to implement a comprehensive strategy to find the missing and bring perpetrators to justice, it will only worsen the most severe crisis of enforced disappearance in Latin America in decades.



A woman carries a banner bearing photographs of missing persons in a march by mothers of the disappeared in Mexico City, May 10, 2012.

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