

SOLIDARIDAD

 **Witness for Peace**
Transforming People — Transforming Policy

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Mexico's 43 Disappeared Students and the U.S.-Led Drug War

All across the globe, you can hear the cry: “You took them alive, we want them back alive!” This continuing clamor shows there are still many questions about what happened in Iguala, Mexico on September 26, 2014. It is clear that it was a harrowing night. Police fired on a busload of students from the Ayotzinapa Teachers’ School, killing six and injuring over twenty. Forty-three students were then taken captive in police cars. According to various accounts, they were then handed over to local drug traffickers, Guerreros Unidos. What happened afterwards is shrouded in a fog of uncertainty about the specific events. And there are doubts about the Mexican government’s version, which is that the students were incinerated in a nearby dump.

What is certain is that people don’t just disappear. What is not certain—but

devastatingly likely—is that all 43 are dead, despite hopeful and tireless pleas to return them. Why such pessimism? Because it’s hard to ignore the context in which this happened. In the words of prominent human rights defender Alejandro Solalinde, Mexico is “one big mass grave. Wherever you turn, you find the dead.” In fact, in the couple of weeks following the student massacre and disappearances, about twenty mass graves were found outside the city of Iguala alone. Although none of the bodies in them turned out to be the students’, it was a reminder of how many Mexican citizens—as well as Central American migrants passing through Mexico—have been disappeared in recent years. Forced disappearances—disappearances that occur with state omission or commission - have skyrocketed since 2006, when then-President Felipe

Calderón, with unflinching U.S. support, declared war on drugs.

Calderón’s discourse involved defeating an enemy—the drug cartels, which, of course, wouldn’t exist without the widespread

consumption and prohibition of drugs in the U.S. The result was scaled-up militarization of Mexico: more state security forces throughout the country; more tanks, surveillance devices, Blackhawk helicopters, and sophisticated weapons. Who has benefited? It has mostly been the U.S. arms and “security” industries, which, ever since another war—the one “on Terror”—was declared, have been having a field day.

But it wasn't just that the Mexican government wanted a war. There was plenty of U.S. governmental support and enthusiasm. In 2007, Congress passed the Mérida Initiative, and since then has spent over \$2.4 billion through it. Bush supported the Initiative, as does Obama. The vast majority of its funds has been used to purchase the aforementioned military equipment. Another significant chunk has been allocated to train Mexican military and police. But despite all this training, human rights abuses committed by these same forces have dramatically increased.

So, while most of the financial profits of the Mexican War on Drugs have stayed on the northern side of the border, most of the human loss has been on its southern side: over 100,000 dead, over 200,000 internally displaced, and over 27,000 disappeared. In fact, disappearances, arbitrary detentions, torture, and harassment have not only increased alarmingly in Mexico since



A wall in Oaxaca with the faces and names of the 43.

PHOTO CREDIT: MAGGIE ERVIN

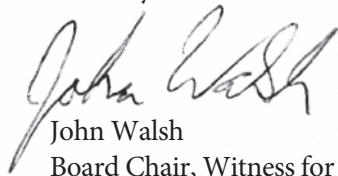
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Message from the Board Chair

Dear Friends

Witness for Peace is working in 2015 with renewed unity of purpose and fresh energy, and we are stretching every dollar farther these days. Your support and participation prove how much we can accomplish for solidarity and peace at a moment when big changes are impending for Cuba and Colombia, and on the horizon for Central America and the immigrant community in the U.S., even as the militarized expression of U.S. foreign policy continues to sow violence and the top-down economic model continues to breed inequality. Thank you, friends, for your concrete commitment to international social justice.

Sincerely,



John Walsh
Board Chair, Witness for Peace



Mexico's 43 Disappeared Students and the U.S.-Led Drug War *(Continued from front page)*



This number can be found in public spaces throughout Mexico. Though the government has tried to "close the book" on the case, civil society is demanding justice and recognition of the disappearance as a state crime.

PHOTO CREDIT: MAGGIE ERVIN

2007, but have continued to rise under current President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration.

As Francisco Cerezo, coordinator of one of our partner organizations, Comité Cerezo, puts it: "The extrajudicial killing and forced disappearance of the 43 students is just another example in a long line of state crimes, where the Mexican government applies a strategy of fear... The goal is social control through fear." He explains that this governmental control is necessary in order to pass and implement constitutional "reforms"—the consistent theme of which is privatization—without public outcry.

Obama and most U.S. legislators have expressed their unbridled enthusiasm for these "reforms," which involve the education, telecommunications, energy, tax and labor sectors. These "reforms" are most detrimental towards Mexico's poor—which still constitute over half of its population—as well as its middle class.

So while it may be tempting to view the horrors of Iguala and the country's other less-noticed but no less gruesome disappearances as Mexican phenomena, that is simply not the case. As we've seen in Colombia and throughout Latin America, this U.S.-led approach to counter-narcotics has left much death in its wake.

As another of our partners, the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity's Araceli Rodriguez, articulates: "It's not right, not ethical, not Christian to shed so much blood, cause so much devastation all throughout the country, in a War that leaves intact the principal economic beneficiaries in the drug-trafficking industry. We want justice for our families, we want justice for our children, parents, siblings... unjustly disappearing in this War."

She could have been speaking to the U.S. Congress.

More than ever it's time to raise our voices as U.S. residents. We must speak out against the undervaluing of Latin American lives. Against a military response to a social phenomenon. Against the silencing of the voices that question neoliberal policies. Against human rights abuses committed by the same troops our government so proudly trains. We must call out these policies on their devastation of communities and their ways of life.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Join our January 2016 delegation: "Militarization of Police and Criminalization of Social Movements in Mexico". For more information, contact Elise Roberts at wfpumw@witnessforpeace.org or 920.421.2269
- Take action to stop the U.S.'s funding the Mérida Initiative (<http://bit.ly/1HIzTfj>). Through it the U.S. government has spent over \$2.4 billion, most of which has been used to militarize Mexico. Tell your representatives to stop funding the Initiative (<http://bit.ly/1wtITYW>).
- Help fund our Mexico Program by donating to Witness for Peace.



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DELEGATIONS

Colombia

Beyond Dollars and Pesos: The Real Cost of Free Trade in Colombia

August 22-31, 2015

Delegation Coordinator

Gail Phares, 919-624-0646

gailphares@earthlink.net

Cuba

Past, Present and Future

September 13-23, 2015

Delegation Coordinator

Omar Barberena

professor00@yahoo.com

Race, Gender, and Identity

November 28-December 7, 2015

Delegation Coordinator

Elise Roberts, 920-421-2269

wfpumw@witnessforpeace.org

Education, Arts and Culture

January 10-20, 2016

Delegation Coordinator

Dixie Olmstead, 651-271-6558

dixie_olmstead@yahoo.com

One Year Later

January 6-16, 2016

Delegation Coordinator

Susan Letendre, 401-268-9810

wfpne@witnessforpeace.org

Mexico

The Militarization of Police and Criminalization of Social Movements

January 08-18, 2016

Delegation Coordinator

Elise Roberts, 920-421-2269

wfpumw@witnessforpeace.org

Nicaragua

Fabric and Fair Trade: Teen Delegation

June 13-27, 2015

Delegation Coordinators

Witness for Peace Southeast, 919-856-9468

office@wfpse.org

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Grassroots Action

Witness for Peace New England hosts Cuban popular educator and writer Ariel Dacal Díaz, October 11–31. Dr. Díaz is an historian, researcher, and member of the popular education team of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center in Havana. He will speak on U.S.-Cuba relations past and present, the process of change, and what revolutionary aspects of the Cuban economy and society Cubans will work to preserve. The course of the tour will be determined by early responders who book “anchor” events. So please let us know of your interest as soon as possible. WFPNE is currently planning two Cuba delegations and one to Honduras for early 2016. Please call or email, with “delegation” in the subject line, for information. Susan Letendre: wfpne@verizon.net, **401-268-9810**.

Witness for Peace Southeast had a successful annual Pilgrimage for Peace and Justice, with over 300 participants in walks and events in nine localities across NC, focusing on Black Lives Matter, workers’ rights, and immigration reform. WFPSE has been active on the Trans-Pacific Partnership, holding meetings with a NC congressman and public events with statewide consumer, labor and environmental organizations, including a press conference and a well-attended rally by a high-traffic highway. WFPSE looks forward to the annual Rice and Beans Dinner in August and a November speaker tour on Ayotzinapa.

Contact the **Southwest Region** at www.wfpnw.org; by phone: **805-669-VIVA**; via email: tanya@wfpnw.org.

Witness for Peace Upper Midwest is thrilled to announce our official expansion to include work in Nebraska, Kansas, and Missouri, and our new regional name “Witness for Peace – Midwest.” Alfredo Lopez from OFRANEH (Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras) will be touring the Midwest region in October with a powerful presentation “Afro-Indigenous Hondurans in Resistance: the U.S. Drug War, Violent Displacement, and Migration.” We are also currently recruiting for winter delegations in Mexico, Cuba, and Honduras.

Check out our website and Facebook page for further updates. To get in touch with your regional organizer or to learn more about upcoming events and delegations, please visit witnessforpeace.org/grassroots.

After Over a Decade of Grassroots Pressure, Fumigation To Be Stopped in Colombia!

On May 9, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos ordered suspension of aerial fumigation of coca crops by October 15, 2015. This is a huge victory for U.S. and Colombian civil society, which for years have been calling attention to the disastrous effects of fumigation. Recently, WFP signed onto a letter urging an end to U.S.-backed fumigation in Colombia. However, many within the U.S. military, defense contractors, and corporations like Monsanto—which makes the glyphosate herbicide used in fumigation—have criticized the suspension and have interests in resuming it. So we must build on this victory to continue to push for the end to the U.S.-directed War on Drugs, as it plays out in the form of militarization throughout Latin America, a pretense for transnational extraction of the region’s resources, criminalization of social movements, and other harmful manifestations.

Breaking: Cuba Removed from Terror List!

Effective May 29, 2015, Cuba was removed from its nonsensical place on the U.S. list of State Sponsors of Terrorism. This is another enormous triumph, following decades of pressure from the grassroots, including the witness and advocacy of thousands who have traveled to Cuba with WFP!

Efforts to Stop Fast Track for the TPP

WFP, along with organizations within the Citizens Trade Campaign’s coalition, have participated in broad-based efforts this spring and summer to keep Fast Track legislation for the NAFTA-on-steroids Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement from passing Congress. These efforts included a national call-in day to Congress on June 3rd. WFP continues to stand against NAFTA-style “free trade” deals like the TPP, which economically displace small-scale farmers and workers, including in Mexico, one of the countries that would be part of the TPP.



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Alliance for Prosperity Plan: A (Dangerous) Plan for Honduras and Central America

Earlier this year, Vice President Biden announced a proposed \$1 billion aid package to El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, purportedly to help resolve the root causes of migration that recently sparked a large number of unaccompanied children fleeing Central America. Vice President Biden framed this package as “systemic change.” Yet several elements of the plan resemble the same failed policies that the U.S. has pursued in the region for years, which created this recent migration episode.

Vice President Biden’s New York Times op-ed published earlier this year, argued that the “transformation” of the three Northern Triangle countries needs to be modeled on Plan Colombia, the six-year, \$7.5 billion dollar scheme that failed to achieve its ostensible main goal of making a significant dent in Colombia’s drug production. Some, including Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, argue the op-ed could have more accurately called this “transformation” a “re-location:” as drug cartels moved from Colombia to Honduras, following the U.S.-supported coup in the latter country.

One of the Plan’s elements is the U.S.’ continued and increased military and police assistance to the region, a concerning factor especially in a country like Honduras, which is infamous for its murder rate and where the police killed 149 civilians from January 2011 to November 2012, according to Human Rights Watch. The U.S. currently provides assistance to the Honduran police and military despite the fact that they have been linked to corruption and numerous human rights abuses. The Central American reality of militarization, rampant corruption and dangerous “development” strategies indicate that

U.S. assistance under the plan proposed by the White House will undermine real development.

Radio Progreso, an independent radio station in Honduras, believes the Alliance is more than a risky investment for the U.S.: “Like many of these plans, in the context of corruption and militarization, financing is not only unhelpful but can deteriorate the situation”.

The corruption in the region that Radio Progreso mentions cripples opportunities for development. The latest corruption scandal in Honduras underscores the lack of pre-existing conditions needed for the Plan’s purported goals—of creating economic opportunities, ending violence and alleviating poverty—to be reached. Just last month, President Hernández’s political party was accused of stealing millions of dollars from the country’s social security institute (IHSS), and allegedly using these funds for Hernández’s 2013 presidential campaign. That same election was marred with accusation of irregularities and fraud.

Another concerning element of the Plan is the creation of special economic zones that will likely support or dovetail with Honduras’ planned Employment and Economic Development Zones (ZEDEs), commonly known as “Charter Cities” or “Model Cities.” In their most recent incarnation, the cities are defined as administrative divisions of the country operating with little governmental control and regulation. Indigenous communities and international bodies have expressed concerns about the negative impacts ZEDEs stand to have on indigenous communities and Afro-descendant groups, like displacement and other human rights violations in order to lure in foreign investors, who seek to acquire land and resources cheaply.

The Alliance for Prosperity plan is a prime example of how U.S. assistance can do more harm than good, and that is why Witness for Peace and our Honduran partners are calling on the United States government to not sponsor the Alliance’s failed development policies, and to furthermore suspend aid to the Honduran police and military.



Honduran police and military outside the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam protested by indigenous Hondurans. Harmful mega-projects like these could increase even more under the Alliance for Prosperity plan.

PHOTO CREDIT: CICA