



Protesters on the Day of the Searching Mother in Mexico City, foto: Sandra Suaste Ávila /Red TdT

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WHERE ARE THEY? ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE IN MEXICO

Where are they? Thousands of families in Mexico ask themselves this question every day as they search for missing relatives. In August 2025, over 130,000 people are registered as disappeared in Mexico. Their relatives are not only struggling with the loss, but also with the uncertainty: Is he or she still alive? What are the circumstances of the disappearance? Who is responsible?

In their search for certainty, relatives often take the search into their own hands: they exchange information in collectives, follow anonymous clues and comb remote places for mass graves. Over the years, many become real experts in forensic work. It is often the women in the families who lead this search. The *Madres Buscadoras* have long since gained recognition for their work beyond Mexico's borders. They are taking on a task in Mexican society that the state and its authorities have so far failed to fulfill.

A face behind every number

The number of disappeared persons in Mexico is recorded in the National Register of Disappeared Persons (*Registro Nacional de Personas Desaparecidas y No Localizadas*), although civil society organizations believe that the actual number of cases is much higher, since many go unreported. Families often refrain from filing reports out of concern for their own safety. Many

fear that information may be passed on directly to criminals by corrupt police officers, or that the authorities themselves may be involved in the crime.

The perpetrators often use disappearances to silence critical voices: Journalists investigating the entanglements of crime and local politics, or human rights defenders exposing violence in their communities, are frequently targeted. In addition, socially marginalized groups such as migrants, members of Afro-Mexican or indigenous communities, and members of the LGBTIQ* community are at particularly high risk of

What are enforced disappearances?

Enforced disappearance "is considered to be the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law."

Article 2 of the "International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance"

The German Coordination for Human Rights in Mexico is a network formed by: Amnesty International Germany, Brot für die Welt, CAREA e.V., Episcopal Action Adveniat, Franziskaner Helfen, Initiative Mexiko (INIMEX), jesuitenweltweit, Kindermissionswerk 'Die Sternsinger' e.V. (Pontifical Missionary Childhood of Germany), Mexico via Berlin e.V., Mexiko-Initiative Köln-Bonn, Misereor, Ökumenisches Büro für Frieden und Gerechtigkeit e.V., Pacta Servanda e.V., Partner Süd Mexikos e.V., pax christi Kommission Solidarität Eine Welt, Promovio e.V., Welthaus Bielefeld e.V., Zapapres e.V.

becoming victims of enforced disappearance. In many cases, discrimination by authorities and the fear of deportation or repression mean that crimes against these particularly vulnerable groups are not even reported. Furthermore, even when cases are reported, authorities do not systematically record whether the person belongs to a particularly vulnerable group. For example, the Register of Disappeared Persons (*Registro de Personas Desaparecidas*) only records a fraction of the number of disappeared migrant cases, with around 400 cases reported. Non-governmental organizations, on the other hand, estimate that between 72,000 and 120,000 migrants disappeared between 2006 and 2016 alone.

The victims of enforced disappearances are predominantly young men between the ages of 15 and 40. However, the number of disappeared women and especially of children and young people has risen alarmingly in recent years. Currently, almost 30,000 women are considered missing. In addition, 4,500 children between the ages of 10 and 14 and almost 15,000 young people between the ages of 15 and 19 have disappeared. In many of these cases, enforced disappearances conceal crimes of sexual violence, femicide, forced recruitment, as well as exploitation and human trafficking.

Thus, enforced disappearances are designed to ensure that the perpetrators remain unpunished. The near-total impunity for such crimes in Mexico is reflected in the number of convictions. Between 2015 and 2022, there were over 4,000 open

investigations into enforced disappearances, but by August 2022, only 79 trials had been concluded. Only 36 people had been convicted.

Legislation against enforced disappearances: A civil society achievement

At a legal level, Mexico initially appears to be well positioned compared to international standards. In 2017, Congress passed the *General Law against Enforced Disappearances*, intended to implement the *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance*, which the country had ratified in 2008. The law establishes binding procedures for the search for disappeared persons and provides for the creation of new institutions such as search commissions, special prosecutors' offices, forensic identification centers and a national forensic database.

The very existence of such a law is a major achievement of civil society, whose pressure increased particularly after the disappearance of the 43 students from Ayotzinapa in 2014 (see box). Since then, Mexico's civil society has been pushing for consistent implementation. As of 2025, only some of the planned forensic identification centers are actually working, and a national forensic database has not yet been established. Also, relatives of the victims and civil society organizations are demanding that the search commissions be provided with the necessary resources to carry out their work.

Ayotzinapa

On 2014, September 26th, 43 students from the Rural Teachers' College of Ayotzinapa, located in the state of Guerrero, disappeared in the city of Iguala after being attacked by local police forces. Investigations by an independent group of experts (GIEI) of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights revealed that there had been cover-ups in the course of the official investigations and that the Attorney General's Office under Peña Nieto's administration had deliberately tried to impose a false version of the events. It also came to light that local officials and authorities were involved in criminal networks and that the military, intelligence service and national police units were present on the night of the disappearance. A truth commission under the previous government of López Obrador declared the case a state crime. Nevertheless, the case has not yet been fully resolved. The relatives of the disappeared attribute this, among other causes, to the army's refusal to hand over requested documentation and hope that President Sheinbaum's government will firmly intervene to clarify what happened.

In January 2025, the discovery of mass graves on a ranch in Teuchitlán, Jalisco state, shook the country. Protests erupted across the country, prompting newly elected president Claudia Sheinbaum to pledge that the search for the disappeared would be a top priority. As a result, the government initiated a reform of the law against enforced disappearances. Individual reform steps were welcomed by civil society: from now on, all investigation files on enforced disappearances are to be pooled in a national database. Furthermore, the State has declared its intention to take preventative action against enforced disappearances and to protect family members who are searching. The protection of those searching is an important demand of the relatives' collectives: Between 2011 and 2024, 22 relatives searching for their disappeared loved ones were murdered in Mexico, and another nine have themselves gone missing since 2018. Another significant change is that authorities will now respect and use the chosen names of trans people. In contrast, the creation of a central identity database (*Plataforma Única de Identidad, PUI*) for all Mexican citizens, including biometric data, has been criticized by civil society groups. Concerns focus on the secure management of this sensitive data and the risk of it being misused for surveillance purposes, as the reform also provides for the PUI to be compared with other databases, such as telecommunications data.

Who are the 72,000 unidentified dead?

One of the biggest challenges, apart from the search for missing persons, is the identification of mortal remains. More than 72,000 bodies have not been identified. Unfortunately, the Extraordinary Mechanism for Forensic Identification (MEIF - *Mecanismo extraordinario de identificación forense*), created in 2019 by the Mexican government at the request of civil society, was discontinued in 2024 due to financial cuts. A project for forensic identification in Mexico funded by the German government is currently being implemented under the umbrella of the UN Population Fund (UNFPA). In cooperation with German universities, 5,000 bone samples have been analyzed so far, and thanks to fingerprint scanners and comparison with the Mexican electoral register, over 6,000 matches were identified in 2024.

State responsibility

In the 20th century, enforced disappearances in Mexico were a crime committed primarily by state authorities who used this violent method against opposition movements. With the government's declaration of the 'war on drugs' and the military assuming extensive powers concerning internal security, there has been an exponential increase in disappearances since 2006, accompanied by a diversification of motives, perpetrators, and victims. According to reports of the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances (CED), which monitors the implementation of this UN Convention by signatory states and began its country visits in 2021

with first visiting Mexico, state authorities at all levels continue to be responsible as direct perpetrators of enforced disappearances. Moreover, it is also noted that organized crime has become the main actor of disappearances, with the complicity and varying degrees of participation, collusion, or inactivity of state authorities. In its 2022 and 2023 reports, the CED called on Mexico to recognize the state's responsibility for enforced disappearances, to take measures to eliminate impunity, and

to fully implement the law against enforced disappearances. The CED also urged Mexico to abandon its current policy of militarizing internal security and to ensure that the families of disappeared persons and civil society can be involved in the development of a nationwide policy against enforced disappearances.

In April 2025, a few weeks after the discoveries in Teuchitlán, the CED decided to activate Article 34 of the UN Convention against Enforced Disappearances for the first time in history. This allows the Committee to bring a case before the UN General Assembly

if there are „verified indications that enforced disappearances are being practiced in a generalized or systematic manner.” The Mexican government accepted the 2022 recommendations and committed to implementing them. At the same time, there is still a tendency within the government to play down state



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Teuchitlán

In early March 2025, the search collective *Guerreros Buscadores* discovered several mass graves in Teuchitlán, in the state of Jalisco. On the Izaguirre Ranch, they also uncovered a suspected organized crime training camp, which appears to have been used as an execution site. In addition to fireplaces in which bodies are believed to have been burned, numerous personal belongings of the victims were found, including large quantities of clothing and shoes, as well as ID cards and farewell letters.

The findings confirm reports of so-called extermination sites, where victims of enforced disappearances are disposed of. According to reports from survivors, these were often forcibly recruited men who had not survived the training to become contract killers, but women are also among the victims.

The discovery led to vociferous criticism of the investigating authorities. It was only in September 2024 that the National Guard entered the area, arresting 10 people and freeing 2. In March, however, a total of 1,844 items were found that had not been secured by the local authorities at that time. It was not until January 2025 that a study by the University of Guadalajara revealed that over 300 public servants from Jalisco had been involved in enforced disappearances between 2018 and 2024.

The case was taken up by the Attorney General's Office for investigation, but criticism of the poor treatment of the families and the lack of rigor in the investigation has continued. The United Nations Committee on Enforced Disappearances urged Mexico to investigate the case thoroughly.

responsibility for enforced disappearances. Arguing that the high number of disappearances is the fault of organized crime and not the state, Mexico's government criticized the application of Article 34. Civil society organizations see the activation of this article by the CED not so much as a punishment for Mexico but rather as an offer of help to tackle this crisis in

collaboration with the international community, as well as an opportunity to receive technical assistance. They also continue to demand that the law on forced disappearances be fully enforced, in close collaboration with the families' collectives, whose slogan is one of their main demands: *¡Sin las Familias no!* (Not without the families!)

Against this background, the German Coordination for Human Rights in Mexico recommends:

To the German Federal Government:

- Work to strengthen legal structures in Mexico to resolve cases of enforced disappearances and counteract impunity.
- To emphasize in bilateral talks the need to fully implement the Law against Enforced Disappearances and to achieve tangible progress in implementing Germany's recommendations to Mexico made during the Universal Periodic Review before the United Nations Human Rights Council.
- To continue the successful German-Mexican cooperation in the field of forensic identification and to provide further financial support.
- To advocate for the protection of family members seeking asylum.

To the European Union:

- To always address enforced disappearances specifically and in depth in the EU's human rights dialogue with Mexico.
- To monitor the implementation of the CED recommendations and demand measurable progress in the international cooperation with Mexico.

- To use the framework of the EU's Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument - Global Europe, for supporting the work of family groups in their search efforts, and to finance projects that promote truth, memory and public access to archives on the subject.

To the Mexican government:

- To recognize the responsibility of state authorities for enforced disappearances and implement the CED recommendations in cooperation with civil society.
- To strengthen the National Search System financially and in terms of human resources, ensuring its effective and transparent operation.
- To publicly acknowledge the important work carried out by the relatives of missing persons in searching for their loved ones, effectively protect them from acts of violence using the State Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, and guarantee them access to psychological and legal support and social assistance, minimizing bureaucratic procedures.



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