

7. Victims, society and information

In Mexico there is a tendency to undervalue or minimize the weight of organized civil society. This authoritarian undercurrent hinders analysis; there is more than enough information to ensure that the stronger the social fabric is, the lower the level of criminality and the greater the support for victims. Coahuila clearly demonstrates this.

At the heart of the process we are going to examine is information. The Zetas and their allies in the government did everything they could to deny it, conceal it, or alter it. The victims, human rights organizations and some media sources did what they could to recover it, order it and circulate it. Fundamental to this task was the backing of national and international media organizations.

Denial, evasion and manipulation of information

It is frequent for those involved in acts of violence to seek to deny, evade or manipulate information. Leaving aside the individual motivations and degree of awareness of these activities, we seek simply to establish their existence.

Denial

From the judicial dossier on the prison of Piedras Negras we took 29 statements made by personnel working at the prison. We divided these into two groups. 17 accepted that the Zetas controlled the prison and 12 denied it, using phrases such as “I never noticed any irregularities,” “everything functioned normally,” or “from where I was standing I couldn’t see anything.” It is notable that the group of 17 worked in the buildings inside the security perimeter; the rest in the court and administration building. A six-meter-wide gap established two different cognitive universes.

Denial was also used by the municipal officers of Allende. In his statement to the State Attorney General, the municipal president assured that he had not been an “eyewitness to the events”; he found out via “isolated comments from people who had not witnessed the events either.”

Evasion

This is a mechanism often used to avoid responsibility. It is expressed in many different ways. Here we present how it has been used by a Zeta member and by the president of Mexico.

On different occasions, the Prison Boss ascribed to others the responsibility for the barbarity that he oversaw daily: “with a wooden board **they** beat the inmates on their buttocks”; “**I had no desire to take** anything from a prisoner that wasn’t mine”; **they**... put

a body in a 200-liter barrel that **they** brought in on their pick-ups.” There is an obvious attempt to deny his involvement.

In 2011 there was already a strong movement in place demanding recognition of the humanitarian crisis impacting on innocent victims. Nevertheless, President Felipe Calderón continued to stick firmly to the narrative that it was “criminals killing each other.” In two speeches during those years he presented himself as someone who arrives at their new house to find it full of “termites and cockroaches.” Then they find “scorpions and rats” and it is no longer enough to “stick down the carpet with spit and chewing gum.” It is necessary to “pull up the carpet and clean out. For however long it takes [...] because it’s your home.”^{cxii}

Manipulation of information

It is common that those who control territories seek to halt, control or modulate the flows of information. We will discuss the media below. Here, we set out the very serious concealment of information about the disappeared.

One day before the end of the Felipe Calderón administration, the *Washington Post* revealed the existence of a list of 29,386 people presumed disappeared, compiled by the PGR using data provided by state prosecutor’s offices throughout the country. The newspaper correspondent received the document from PGR officials who objected to the silence imposed by the Calderón government.^{cxiii}

Combatting denial, evasion and manipulation of information

The victims in Coahuila stand out because many of them lost their fear and filed police reports about what was going on. They found people and institutions prepared to listen to them and spread their message. This effort was decisive in bringing forced disappearance onto the national agenda.

According to several families of the victims, the public prosecutor’s offices in northern Coahuila discouraged the filing of police reports. These testimonies were corroborated in the US courts by one of the principal witnesses, Héctor Moreno: when the Zetas “started to kill all these innocent people, and their families tried to file reports, they were told they would not take down even one report, and that they had 24 hours to leave the city.”^{cxiv}

Given this context, it is notable how many did file a police report. Propuesta Cívica obtained a copy of the database concealed by the Calderón government. Its analysis showed that the Coahuila public prosecutor’s office had reported to the PGR 120 “people reported as disappeared” in 2010, and 127 in 2011.^{cxv} According to the National Register of Missing or Disappeared People (RNPED) 47 of these (almost 20 percent) were reported in the first year after the event.

Churches and human rights organizations

By early 2017 there were four victims' groups active in Coahuila (Allende, Piedras Negras, Saltillo and Torreón) in continual dialogue with the state government and with national and international bodies. How was it that the victims moved from anonymity to playing a central role in such a short time?

Just one person or institution is needed to set off a process and provide consistency to a strategy. There from the start was the Fray Juan de Larios Diocesan Center for Human Rights (Saltillo), created in 2002. Here the people met who in 2009 would set up Fuerzas Unidas por Nuestros Desaparecidos en Coahuila (FUUNDEC), to represent the families of 21 disappeared people.

In northern Coahuila the social fabric was weaker. The first public actions by victims were in Piedras Negras when 15-year-old Gerardo Heath disappeared on March 18, 2011 (the weekend of the acts of vengeance). One year later, on his birthday, the family organized a huge rosary ceremony. Two thousand people attended, and offered up their prayers under the watchful eyes of the Mexican Army and twelve units from the State Attorney General's Office.

The rosary ceremonies in memory of Gerardo Heath were repeated for another two years. The bishop Alonso Garza never attended, but sent a representative. Of the three bishops in Coahuila the only one to involve himself actively in supporting victims was the Bishop of Saltillo, Don Raúl Vera López. In 2013 the group Familias Unidas en la Búsqueda y Localización de Personas Desaparecidas appeared in Piedras Negras, and organizes legal representation for several victims.

The media

It is worth dedicating more space to analyzing the media, due to their strategic role in the struggle for transparency and accountability. We will compare the reaction of newspapers in the north, in Saltillo and in Torreón. All three agreed that there is an absence of protection from the government.

Zócalo is the daily with the highest circulation in the north of the state, the region under the control of the Zetas. On March 11, 2013 it published an editorial announcing that “due to the lack of guarantees and security for the full exercise of journalistic activities, the Editorial Board of *Zócalo* has decided that, from today, it will not publish any information related to organized crime.”^{cxvi}

During the first years of the rising Zeta tide, there was more freedom to circulate information in Saltillo. This was due, in part, to the fact it acted as a kind of safe haven for the Zeta leaders. This changed in March 2011 as a result of the bi-national offensive against the Zetas unleashed following the execution a month earlier of a US migration officer.

Ricardo Mendoza was Editor-in-Chief of *Vanguardia* (based in Saltillo) and provided us with an unpublished text relating the events of Saturday March 5, 2011. Mid-

morning, they received a cellphone call from the feared Pedro Toga Lara, “*Comandante Güacho*.” With the phone on loudspeaker, several journalists listened to the insults, accusations of betrayal and declaration of war. The peroration ended with an order: “you won’t publish anything about us, about organized crime, gunfights, Zetas, nothing.”^{cxvii} They discussed the situation, accepted their vulnerability and followed the order; for a couple of years *Vanguardia* maintained a low profile, while still releasing brief news reports.

In La Laguna, the struggle between the Cartel de Sinaloa and the Zetas for control of the plazas created a completely different situation. Javier Garza was Editor-in-Chief of *El Siglo de Torreón*. In a number of texts and a telephone interview he explained how they handled it. Their starting point was to reject self-censorship, and answer the question: “how to publish without bringing reprisals?” They resolved this by covering the two cartels with scrupulous fairness, publishing only reports that were backed by a government statement, only publishing brief reports and measuring the reaction by an initial release on social networks, before sending them to press, and finally “we leveraged national and international media.”^{cxviii}

The coverage given to the events in Coahuila by national and international media proved to be fundamental. We may take two key reports as an example. On December 24, 2012, almost two years after the acts of vengeance, Juan Alberto Cedillo published a report in *Proceso* entitled “Apocalypse in Coahuila.” It is a clear and valuable text that describes the atrocities of the Zetas in Nava” and Allende. “Hordes of *narcos* razed these two towns in the north of the state, destroying and burning dozens of homes, carrying off entire families, murdering ranch owners and raping women and girls.” This pioneering piece lacked an explicit mention of Allende.^{cxix}

Two more years passed and in February 2014 the journalist Diego Enrique Osorno published the first chronicle of what took place in Allende during the campaign of vengeance. He narrated the kidnappings, homicides and the destruction of homes. In a long piece published by *Vice* magazine, Allende gradually became a paradigmatic case. It is here that the figure of 300 victims appears for the first time. Osorno also makes reference to what happened at the Piedras Negras CERESO.^{cxx}

The impact of information on organizations in Mexico and the United States
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Governments have different reactions to atrocities. In Mexico they pay attention when a tragedy is taken up by journalists, human rights organizations and academics. In this sense, Coahuila is a test case because there has been a very intense interaction between victims, the media, human rights organizations and academics. We will refer to three cases from 2011, 2016 and 2017.

The United Nations Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances visited Saltillo in March 2011. This was a key moment for making what was happening in the state more widely known, and for empowering victims’ groups. This international

recognition, together with the work of local media, was decisive in setting in motion the meetings held between civil bodies and the state authorities.

By 2016, what had happened in Allende was a national and international scandal. The Coahuila state government took the decision to hand over the legal dossier on Allende to the CEAV, who in turn agreed to pass it to the Seminar on Violence and Peace at the Colegio de México. The CNDH, meanwhile, provided a large amount of information. This rare level of cooperation and agreement has led to a greater understanding of the facts and a review of a number of public policies.

The investigation by Ginger Thompson into Allende was published by ProPolitica in June 2017. Two months later, high-level Democrats on the Foreign Affairs and Judiciary Committees of the House of Representatives demanded the Department of Justice and the State Department open an investigation into the operations led by the DEA in Honduras and Mexico, which led to the deaths of dozens—perhaps hundreds—of people who had nothing to do with the drugs trade.^{cxxi}

In short, the battles for information are fundamental and Coahuila shows the weight that victims and society can bring to bear when they act in an organized manner.