

TRIBUNA

Mexico: the imperative search

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Eulalio Garza is digging with his hands. The damp earth gets underneath his fingernails. He digs, digs, digs. A piece of cloth appears. The sixty year old man tugs on the cloth and out comes a bundle. Slowly, he opens it, and a black sandal appears, followed by a red polo shirt with blue and white stripes, a light-coloured denim shirt -burnt on one side- and a coloured blouse with white strings.

Eulalio -sitting next to the one-meter deep hole- checks the footwear. The dirt, stuck to the plastic, doesn't allow him.

"What does it say?" he asks Graciela Pérez while reaching her the sandal.

She takes the sandal while wearing medical protective gloves, cleans it and answers: "Titanio. Does it sound familiar?"

"No, jus' fo' gluing or something like that... so outta the blue..." says the man without making much sense.

"What did you find?" Vicente Hernández inquires over the walkie-talkie.

"Just clothes," the woman replies.

Eulalio doesn't get up, but keeps inspecting the clothes, looking for some kind of sign or label or stain, investigating the hole thoroughly. Eulalio is looking for a clue to find his son or Graciela's daughter or Carmen's son or Antonia's husband or Daniela's firstborn or one of Tamaulipas' other six thousand missing persons.

Tamaulipas is a Mexican state, in the shape of an elephant, bordering the Gulf of Mexico and the United States of America; an elephant with a surface of 80,249 square kilometres, 420 kilometres of coast along the Gulf of Mexico, five international airports and 17 border crossings. This is where the second province of New Spain was founded, some 490 years ago.

Nine decades ago, it was also the birthplace of Juan N. Guerra, the leader of a group of smugglers who sold whisky to US bootleggers, Al Capone amongst them. During the second half of the seventies, the group became a criminal organisation, trafficking drugs with clear rules: only relatives could be bosses, they needed to lead a discrete life, avoid public acts of violence and financially maintain the protection from national, state and municipal authorities. Society either loved or feared them. From the eighties onward, the succeeding capo Juan García Ábrego lifted the group to a higher level, bringing it just below the Guadalajara Cartel. To put it at the same level in appearances, Juan García named the group the Gulf Cartel. After his arrest, an ex-mechanic took over the reins of the group and, in order to become completely equivalent, started sending Christmas presents to poor children. The group extended its control all the way to Nuevo León, including its capital Monterrey. Society loved, respected and feared them. Being a member of the cartel represented social status.

The violence started in 2003. During that year, the Gulf Cartel and the Sinaloa Cartel started a battle of death and terror in Nuevo Laredo. The groups fought for the control over the city that hosted the most productive customs office for foreign trade in Latin America. This is where Los Zetas, the weaponed arm of the Gulf Cartel, appeared. This commando existed of deserted military personnel, who received further training in guerrilla tactics from Americans and Israelis. The battle lasted for more than thirty months. Los Zetas burned houses and business, butchered their presumed rivals, dismembered people, threw the population into terror, mainly through the disappearance of persons. In 2006, when Felipe Calderón Hinojosa took office as president of Mexico, he declared war on drug trafficking. Violence and terror progressively increased until 2010. The Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas did what they knew best: make war.

“ In 2003, violence started in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. The Gulf Cartel and the Sinaloa Cartel started a battle of death and terror ”

This was where the war started, right where Eulalio Garza was digging, in the Ribereña region, less than one kilometre away from the border wall separating Mexico from the United States. For decades, its semi-arid surface had been the setting where Texans had fun on hunting ranches, both livestock and agriculture produced dividends and Petróleos Mexicanos (Pemex) extracted hydrocarbons. Another distinctive activity of the area was and is the trafficking of drugs and people.

In Ribereña, peace is just a memory, a longing. On February 22nd of 2010, Los Zetas challenged the Gulf Cartel. Dozens of men started waging war. When the Armed Forces stepped in, the gangsters had already murdered, kidnapped and disappeared female and male students, young professionals, mothers, fathers, grandparents. "Here, of those who have people missing, it's very rare to have only one person missing; we all have more missing persons, more relatives, let's say nephews or uncles or cousins, there are many, everyone has at least three or four," says a woman named Carmen.

Carmen has not received any news from her son for eight years, the same period Antonio has been looking for his wife or during which Olga Mayorga has been insisting on inspecting the mass graves to look for her son Diego Armando, her son-in-law Raúl and his friends Rubén and José Manuel.

Olga has been searching the central northern area of Tamaulipas for almost three thousand days. The last time she heard from her relatives was on the evening of February 24th of 2010. The men disappeared on the road, in the midst of the clashes. Olga's request for help was ignored by the military. She and her siblings searched the country roads and found open vans, full of blood, abandoned clothing, bullet shells, and discovered the vehicle their relatives had been using. The year 2010 crept forward. In the month of August, 72 migrants were murdered in San Fernando, Olga's place of residence. The massacres in Nuevo León and Tamaulipas multiplied. The government only showed up to collect the bodies. Olga accepted the fact that her son could be dead and did her first DNA test. The convoys of vans with armed men, the car bomb attacks against the media and the authorities, the kidnapping of women and the sacking of ranches had become common events.

Olga kept searching until the gangsters started intimidating her daughter. On the morning of February 28th of 2011, the women requested the Barack Obama administration for asylum on the Matamoros international bridge. This request was accepted, but Olga renounced to the protection, in order not to abandon her search. On her long journey along the border, she met Miriam Rodríguez Martínez.

Miriam was the leader of the collective in San Fernando, a group dealing with 600 cases of missing persons. The woman, who ran a business and worked in the town hall, was in charge of managing social and sanitary care. On May 10th of 2017, Miriam Rodríguez succeeded to raise the money for the transfer of the body of Jesús Emanuel to San Fernando. The young man had been murdered the Tuesday before, and the family did not have the means to pay the funeral services. Miriam informed the undertaker and left for lunch to celebrate Mother's Day. When she returned home that evening, she parked her van, got out and, while she was walking, a hitman fired twelve shots at her. The sixty-year old woman died before she reached the general hospital.

“ The problem of the thousands of missing persons remained outside the public spotlight for years; in 2017, people started talking about it on the streets and in the news media ”

Two weeks before the assassination, the Tamaulipan activist had a WhatsApp chat with a companion from the collective. Miriam wrote: “Despite all the pain, I keep believing in God and hoping. And I don't consider stopping. Not until I die. Bastards, I haven't even been able to bury my daughter wholly.”

Karen Alejandra Salinas Rodríguez is the daughter that Miriam was referring to in the message. In January 2014, organised crime members kidnapped the minor. The family asked the bank for a loan, sold whatever they could and paid the ransom. The kidnappers never released her but instead sent a message, saying she was dead. The mother dedicated her life to finding the body and those guilty for her death.

Nine months were enough for Miriam to identify all the killers, one by one. One day, in the village of El Arenal –located in the rural area of San Fernando–, Miriam dug until she found dozens of bones, buried in clandestine graves. She called the District Attorney so they would dig up and safeguard the remains. The state government sent the bones to a lab in Washington. The experts received a puzzle of bodies; they were not able to fully reassemble a single one, there were pieces of six different bodies, with the genetic characteristics of a two-year old boy, pregnant women, young men and one underage girl: Karen Alejandra.

Miriam Rodríguez buried part of her daughter and continued her investigation for three more years. After the escape of 29 inmates from prison in Victoria, Tamaulipas, on March 22nd of 2017, Miriam Rodríguez started fearing for her life. The government gave her the phone number of a police officer. On Friday, April 14th she called thirty times –she held count–, but no one answered. The mother asked the vice-secretary of the Tamaulipas government, Gloria Garza Jiménez, for protection. After her death, the official denied everything. Nevertheless, the request had been recorded on video. The governments of the republic and the state organised a *post mortem* tribute to expiate the irresponsible actions.

“ “In Tamaulipas, we are only few people still searching because fear is big, and the feeling of helplessness is smouldering” ”

The problem of the thousands of missing persons remained outside the public spotlight for years in Tamaulipas. In May 2017, people started talking about it on the streets, news media started publishing items, and there were demands for a solution in public places. Whatever people had achieved in the previous eight months was paralysed. The killing of Miriam held back the few relatives who were still searching, and terrified thousands.

The one who did not hold back was Graciela Pérez Rodríguez. This 49-year old woman was looking for her daughter Milynali, her nephews José Arturo, Alexis and Aldo de Jesús, and her brother Ignacio. They had been abducted by organised crime on August 14th of 2012. The family was travelling in a van from Texas to Tamaúín, San Luis Potosí. When passing El Mante, a town located in the Southwest of Tamaulipas, they went missing. Since that day, their mother, aunt and sister never stopped looking for them.

Graciela Pérez is the strongest and clearest voice of all the collectives of missing persons in Tamaulipas. During her six years' search, she founded the organisation *Ciencia Forense Ciudadana* (CFC – Citizens' Forensic Science). That is where she prepared herself for the proposed field search, in order to register the discovery of human remains in camps of organised delinquency by means of blood and DNA samples, and created a civil genetic register and database. "In Tamaulipas, the ones who are still searching are just ourselves and the relatives of missing persons; we are only few because fear is big, and the feeling of helplessness is smouldering," says the activist who was granted the Human Rights Tulip, an annual prize, awarded by the government of the Netherlands.

Tamaulipas is the state with the highest number of disappearances in Mexico. 18 per cent of the country's persons whose location is unknown were last seen in Tamaulipan territory. Here –considering the numerical situation–the Ayotzinapas case took place 139 times¹. The testimonies and the high percentage are still magnified when we take into account the intentional homicides: 7,327 over the last twelve years. Graciela, Eulalio, Carmen, Antonia, Olga and the prospectors admit not all cases can be found in the official registers. Eight years after the start of the "armed conflict"?, "low-intensity or nonconventional war"?, many women and men have still not declared the death or disappearance of their loved ones.

Precisely in the area where Eulalio had been digging with his bare hands, the first forensic pantheon *Unidos por el Recuerdo* (United through Memory) was opened on April 16th of 2018. The German Cooperation Agency and the Foundation of Forensic Anthropology of Guatemala participated in the exhumation and analysis of bodies or human remains. The relatives keep hoping they will find their sons, daughters, fathers, grandchildren in the graves; that is their wish. They do not have any hope for the State

punishing the perpetrators. They long for the peace they will be able to find once they have located their loved ones, the same peace they find today in their unfaltering search.

1. In September 2014, 43 students of the Escuela Normal Rural in Ayotzinapa (Iguala, Mexico) disappeared, nine were killed and over thirty more were injured after violent encounters with the Police. Four years later, the families of the students continue their struggle to find their bodies, so that the truth comes out and justice can be obtained.

Photography : Author: Carlos Manuel Juárez

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