

# State Violence and Gender in San Salvador Atenco, Mexico

Thursday 2 August 2012, by [HERNANDEZ CASTILLO R. Aída](#) (Date first published: 9 June 2006).

**It is a remarkable commentary on the media monopolies of North America that the violent assault on social movement leaders in Atenco, Mexico in May has been met with silence. Better that the mythologies of Mexican democratization and human rights progress within the confines of NAFTA continue. Since 2002, the people of Atenco, and particularly their women leaders, have become a symbol of resistance to the neoliberal economic model and the insistence that basic human needs be met. The state violence of May was an assault on that resistance. The violence and the subsequent detentions and violations of human rights have sparked a mass campaign in Mexico, encompassing the Zapatista movement and the broad Mexican left, and an international 'Atenco Solidarity Campaign'. This campaign coincides with Mexico becoming chair of the new United Nations Human Rights Council.**

**In opposition to the media blackout, *The Bullet* here presents an important intervention and testimonial by the prominent Mexican writer, Aída Hernández Castillo, on Atenco. It is accompanied by a letter of protest to the Mexican government in support of the Atenco detainees. We urge readers to add their signatures. Finally, an Atenco solidarity meeting is announced.**

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*How can any honest woman in Mexico, regardless of her ideology, remain silent?*

May 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, 2004 will be remembered as some of the saddest and most violent days in the modern history of San Salvador Atenco, on the outskirts of the Mexico City megalopolis. This small town, home to 33 thousand people who still depend on peasant economy, witnessed a violent clash between 300 unarmed civilians, members of the Frente de Pueblos en la Defensa de la Tierra (Peoples Front for the Defense of the Land), and some 4000 policemen from the state and various corporations. The police put the demonstrators down and terrorized the whole community, raiding houses, breaking down doors and arresting without warrants 207 people, including children, women, and the elderly. At the end of the day, 20 people had been seriously injured and a minor was dead.

What had started as a demonstration to support eight street vendors from the neighboring town of Texcoco became a violent clash which most of the media described as the "return to the rule of law" after the arbitrary actions of a "radical group." The image of a group of peasants from Atenco battering a fallen policeman was shown again and again to justify the State's use of violence. The loss of control and violence by a few were used to disqualify a whole movement and to characterize

it as a destabilizing and dangerous force for the State and the population in general. The attack on the policeman should have been punished according to the law, and considering there were plenty of images of the event, it would have been possible to identify the attackers. Instead, state and federal authorities chose to unleash the full force and violence of the state on innocent people, many of whom don't even belong to the group the authorities aimed to disband.

The testimonies of the men and women arrested on these two days, which are now beginning to emerge thanks to human rights organizations, speak of physical and sexual violence on a par with the worst days of the dictatorships in South America. But why use such a show of violence against a group of unarmed, poor peasants? Why use sexual violence against the women in the movement? Was it not against the state's own interests to issue such a repressive response, now that Mexico has been chosen as founding member of the United Nations' recently created Human Rights Council?

Scholars who have studied the social effects of violence and terror have pointed at the difficulty of analyzing and "explaining" them from a scholarly point of view. Australian anthropologist Michael Taussig (*Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man*, 1987) refers to the effect of terror by saying that the stories of violence confronted him with an interpretation problem, until he realized that the problem of interpretation is essential for the reproduction of terror; it not only makes it very difficult to create an effective counter-discourse, but at the same time it empowers the terrifying aspects of death squadrons, disappearances and torture, because it causes demobilization and limits people's capacity to resist. Since terror depends so much on interpretation and sense, it ends up feeding on itself by destroying any evidence of sense and rationality.

In the same way, the disproportionate violence with which those arrested at Atenco were treated has the double effect of demobilizing and inspiring skepticism about what happened, thus making it difficult to create a counter-discourse, break the silence in which our indignation has left us and shake off the indifference that has crept after some of the political prisoners were liberated.

### **A Symbol of Resistance: Frente de Pueblos en la Defensa de la Tierra**

The representations that the news media has constructed around the Frente de Pueblos en la Defensa de la Tierra show a movement of a violent and intolerant nature while at the same time minimizing the numbers of its adherents and their politics and discrediting their leaders. These representations bear little resemblance to the men and women I had the opportunity to meet this past April. They appeared a cheerful, supportive, and inclusive group, well organized and capable of complex political thought. I met them just a few weeks before the fateful clash, at La Cañada de los Sauces, in Cuernavaca, Morelos, in one of the most festive, socially inclusive resistance demonstrations I have ever attended.

During the memorial festivities of Emiliano Zapata, I was among the supporters of the Otra Campaña in Morelos state, the name given to the tour of Mexico by the Zapatistas (EZLN) during the Presidential campaign, awaiting the arrival of Sub-Comandante Marcos to the town of Tetelcingo. Suddenly it was announced that the meeting was moving to La Cañada de los Sauces, in the residential neighborhood of Tabachines, where police were about to force out a group of residents and environmental activists who had chained themselves to trees. They were protesting the construction of a road that would cross the area and required cutting down the ancient willow trees. The arrival of the Otra Campaña at La Cañada forced out the police, the ambulances, and the bulldozers which were ready to bring down the trees and their guardians.

A little while later, about 200 men and women peasants from San Salvador Atenco arrived, marching in order and keeping time with the metallic clatter of their machetes. They came in support of the

people of La Cañada de los Sauces, just like they had in previous days supported the indigenous community of Cacahuatpec, Guerrero, who oppose the construction of the a dam that would expropriate their communal land, and the people of Cuernavaca who resisted the construction of a COSTCO store to protect the historical murals of the old Casino de la Selva, or the people of Texcoco who protested the construction of a Wal-Mart across from the ancient pyramids of Teotihuacan. The peasants of Atenco supported the struggle of these communities and shared with them their experience and strategies. Their success in 2002, when they managed to stop the government building an international airport that would have expropriated five thousand hectares of farming land, has made them into a symbol of resistance against the blows of globalization. These local struggles share a search for alternative ways of development that are respectful of nature and of the historical heritage of communities. The success of the movement in Atenco was proof that it is possible to say NO to the neoliberal economic model which is indifferent to people's wellbeing and excludes the majority of them.

This was the message that the Frente de Pueblos en la Defensa de la Tierra brought to the residents of La Cañada in Cuernavaca, a message that encouraged them to continue resisting. In their speeches, they said that the struggle to defend the old trees of La Cañada was similar to the struggle of many indigenous and peasant peoples in Mexico. The words and songs they brought seemed to melt the barriers between social classes. The meeting became a great popular gathering. The housewives of La Cañada cooked and fed everyone, the workers of the Pascual Boing co-op handed out fruit drinks and the peasants from Atenco enlivened the evening singing corridos about their struggles. The women danced in pairs, clashing their machetes high above their heads in a slow, ritual dance reminiscent of religious dances in indigenous communities. These were strong, extroverted women who shouted out resistance slogans and wielded their machetes with the ease of those who use them in everyday tasks. I could not help thinking of the Zapatista women and of many other women who are fighting from the bottom of society to build a fairer life. I felt inundated by their political energy. I would never have guessed that a few weeks later I would see these same women beaten, bloodied, humiliated, silenced... the political energy I felt that evening in April was a danger the government aimed to eradicate.

As an analyst of social movements, I was impressed by the organizational expertise the Frente de Pueblos possessed. I was awed by their ability to systematize the history of their struggle in songs, by the strength of the women, who seemed to play a central role in the movement, and by the obvious influence the group had over the young students who were at the meeting. Among the crowd, I had the opportunity to witness an informal "passing of the torch" ritual in which an elder from Atenco gave a young woman student from the University of Chapingo his machete. A group of young people crowded around, cheering and shouting slogans, while the man addressed an improvised speech to the girl, who received the machete in recognition of her solidarity with the peasant movement. I wonder now if that girl was among the women who were raped and abused in the jail of Santiaguito. Could it be that that was the punishment for taking on the torch?

At the time I thought it would be a good idea to have one of my students analyze this experience. Perhaps that is also what the teachers at the National School of Anthropology and History thought. Two of their students are now facing criminal charges for being in Atenco on May 4<sup>th</sup>.

That afternoon at La Cañada de los Sauces the police stayed away, and eventually the residents were able to negotiate with the government to save the willows. The political cost of upsetting a residential community or breaking through the home of a Public Attorney that lives in that neighborhood, would have been too high. But repression came later, in lands of poorer people, where it seems it is easier to silence complaints and break down a movement in the name of the rule of law.

## State Violence: Breaking Down the Movement

My previous encounter with the group Frente de Pueblos en la Defensa de la Tierra made me feel suspicious of the images of extreme violence that showed some people of Atenco beating on a policeman. Up to now, the media has failed to give the names or the histories of the attackers, and it is not that far-fetched to think that the movement could have been infiltrated by provocateurs that would then provide the cue to unleash a campaign of repression. It may also be that years of accumulated grief and struggle exploded in an incident of irrational violence for which the movement will have to pay a high price. I do not know what happened, but what is plain and what we have to say over and over again is that nothing justifies police violence, or the violation of the human rights of those taken into custody. The State's legislature had significant foresight when it approved in February 1994 the Law to Prevent and Punish Torture, which establishes that any public officer who inflicts "blows, mutilations, burns, physical or psychological pain, or who withholds food and water" from a person in custody is guilty of torture, as is "any public officer who instigates, compels, authorizes, orders or consents to the aforementioned. ...torture is considered a crime and **this is not affected by exceptional situations, such as internal political instability, urgent investigations, or other circumstances.** Neither can it be excused because it was carried out under superior orders." [1].

During the police raids in Atenco, houses were broken into and destroyed without search warrants, 207 people were taken into custody without arrest warrants, a minor was murdered, 20 people were severely injured—one of whom is still in a coma, (a 20 years undergraduate student of the National University (UNAM)). There were 23 sexual assaults on women, seven of which were rapes. The National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) has received 150 complaints from residents of Atenco. The authorities, whether municipal, state, or federal, have so far failed to accept responsibility for what happened, and President Vicente Fox has justified the use of violence by the police as "the means to bring peace to the people of this community in the midst of rising violence" (*La Jornada*, May 13 2006).

Of those arrested on May 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, 17 were freed, 144 were charged with damage to public property, a misdemeanor for which they can be released on bail, and 28, including the leader of the Frente de Pueblos en la Defensa de la Tierra, Ignacio del Valle Medina, as well as his son, César del Valle, have been formally indicted under charges of false imprisonment and damage to public property. While authorities use the law at their discretion against social leaders, those responsible for the violations to human rights in Atenco are still shamelessly speaking of rule of law.

We need to take the government's discourse about using the full weight of the law in the case of Atenco and make it our own: we must demand the just punishment of government officials responsible for the abuses.

Gender Violence: Subjugating Women Social Leaders

If the women of Atenco waving their machetes in the air had become a symbol of peasant resistance, their bloodstained faces and bodies now represent the shame of a repressive Mexican state. The accounts that have come to public light in the last few weeks show the specific form that violence takes in patriarchal systems in which women are still considered war booty. Both the National Human Rights Commission and the Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro A.C. have direct testimonies from the women being held in custody which describe the sexual attacks they suffered. Most of the victims have preferred to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals, but the deported foreign students Valentina Palma, from Chile, Samantha Diezmar, from Germany, and Christina Valls and María Sastres, from Spain, have denounced the sexual assaults they suffered, as well as those other women were subjected to.

The testimonies made public by the human rights organizations show that the attacks were not isolated cases but rather a strategy of sexual violence which was a key part for the police operation:

*"They started by clubbing us on the head. Then they were touching my breasts, my buttocks. Then I felt a hand touching my vagina and penetrating me with the fingers."*

"There are cases such as that of a 50-year old woman who was forced to perform oral sex on three policemen in order to get them to set her free. Hiding her face in shame and pain, she says she had gone shopping for a gift for her son when policemen in uniform grabbed her. She says they told her 'you have to give us each a blow-job if you want to go back home.' She was afraid they would hit her, like they had done with the other women, so she did what they asked. In the end they set her free."

"They shut the door of the van where they had us and one said 'that bitch needs a wedgie' and started pulling on my panties. He realized I was having my period, because I was wearing a sanitary pad, and shouted to the rest 'look at this bleeding bitch, let's get her even dirtier' as he shoved his fingers in my vagina, many times. I was not really there any more, but I remember I could hear myself saying 'My God, what are they going to do to me?'"

Alicia Elena Perez Duarte, the special attorney in charge of crimes against women, said that upon hearing about these testimonies she tried to get in touch with the women held in custody, but the representatives of the government of the locality said there were no women in custody (*La Jornada*, May 12, 2006). This lie points to a web of complicities which made possible a police strategy of terror and sexual violence.

Marinana Selvas, an anthropology student among the 28 activists still in jail, has contended that the rejection by the Public Attorney to consider the testimonies of rape, as a strategy to allow time to erase any physical evidence of the sexual abuses. This contention has probably put her at risk as she is still under arrest.

Carlos Abascal, the Secretary of State, minimized the relevance of the women's complaints and doubted their veracity. Other lesser officials, such as the regional police chief, Wilfredo Robledo, and the Speaker of the Department of State of the Estado de Mexico, Emmanuel Ávila, disregarded the testimonies as part of a legal defense strategy. Meanwhile, the human rights organizations have pointed out that this type of crime is prosecuted by the state, so it is the job of the public attorney to initiate the investigations.

The criminal law of the state of Mexico, in which the raids took place, defines the crime of rape in article 273 by specifying that: "also guilty of rape is the person who by force, whether it be physical or moral, introduces any part of the body, object or instrument other than the penis in the vagina, anus or mouth of the victim, regardless of gender." Article 274 of the same law establishes that the participation of multiple attackers, that is, more than one person taking part or supporting the aggressor, constitute an aggravating factor. Under these definitions, the experiences described in the testimonies are not just sexual assaults, but rape, and as such should be prosecuted by the state.

The attacks on the women of Atenco add to the long list of women who have been the victims of sexual violence for political motives in the last two presidential terms. For the more conservative sectors of Mexican society—both mestizo and indigenous—any show of organization among women in any community or region has become a synonym of Zapatista influence. Organized women, whether they are Zapatistas or not, are a symbol of resistance and subversion, and for that reason are placed at the center of political violence.

The political use of sexual violence was one of the issues discussed during the first series of talks

between the EZLN and the government on October 1995, in San Cristóbal de las Casas. At the Women's Table during this meeting, the people invited by the government and those brought by the EZLN agreed, in spite of their political differences, that rape should be considered a crime of war as described by international law. There have been no efforts, however, to act on the agreements reached then on those negotiation tables.

Gender analysts from other militarized regions, such as Davida Woods in Palestine or Betty Denich in Sarajevo, point out that in contexts of political military conflict feminine sexuality tends to be transformed into a symbolical space of political struggle and rape is instrumentalized as a way of showing power and dominion over the enemy. Atenco was not an exception: police repression has affected women in particular, as we can readily see from their testimonies. In a patriarchal ideology that still considers women sexual objects and repositories of a family's honor, the rape and sexual torture of women constitutes a way of attacking all the men on the enemy's side. Just like Serbian soldiers, the policemen of Atenco "take possession of women's bodies one after another, as objects of sexual abuse and as symbols in a fight against their male enemies, thereby reproducing traditional patriarchal patterns where the male inability to protect their women, to control their sexuality and their reproductive capacities, is considered a symbol of weakness in the enemy."

In spite of the effectiveness of fear as a disintegrator of social resistance movements, it is evident that the women of Atenco are determined to continue fighting for their rights as women and as members of a community. Their testimony before human rights organizations proposes a counter-discourse that can break the silence of terror. It is our turn to echo their voices and demand that justice be done.

**R. Aída Hernández Castillo**

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LETTER OF PROTEST

TO: GOVERNMENT OF MEXICO

RE: IMMEDIATE RELEASE OF ATENCO AND TEXCOCO DETAINEES

June 19, 2006

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

TO: President Vicente Fox

Governor of the State of Mexico Enrique Peña Nieto

Minister of the Interior Carlos Abascal

Mexican Ambassador to Canada María Teresa García

Segovia de Madero

Cc: Carmen Lira, Editor, La Jornada

We the undersigned people of Canada condemn the May 3 and May 4, 2006 police attacks against the people of Texcoco and San Salvador Atenco, State of Mexico, resulting in the death of Francisco Javier Cortés Santiago; the human rights abuses to which those arrested have been subjected at the hands of authorities; and the sexual assault of female detainees by police. We are deeply concerned that these types of repressive and illegal police practices, which are inadmissible in any democratic society, are becoming typical of the Mexican state response to the legitimate right to dissent. We want you to know that we in Canada are aware of and gravely alarmed by such abuses against Mexican citizens and members of the international community, and we want to express our solidarity

with the families of victims.

We demand the release of all prisoners detained during these attacks and other politically motivated attacks against dissenters. We demand that the Government of Mexico, as called for by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Mexico, submit to an independent public investigation into human rights abuses committed during the Texcoco and Atenco attacks and documented by the National Commission of Human Rights, the Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center and Human Rights Watch.

We demand that charges be laid against planners and perpetrators of physical assault, sexual assault and torture against detainees. We demand the right of safe return to Mexico of foreign nationals who have legal migratory status in Mexico.

This letter has been coordinated by the Toronto Atenco Solidarity Committee, a group comprised of concerned individuals, students, trade unionists, professors, artists and activists. If you wish to sign this letter, please reply to: [torontoatenco@gmail.com](mailto:torontoatenco@gmail.com)

Please include your name, occupation, affiliation and location.

Background: What happened in Atenco?

On May 3 and 4, 2006, there were violent police repressions in two adjacent communities just outside Mexico City. While mainstream media has reported that these were spontaneous events, it has become clear that the government had targeted these communities for attack, and had lists of people ready for arrest in the event that a "spontaneous event" could be fabricated as an opportunity to arrest and intimidate.

It started in Texcoco, where flower merchants were setting up in a local square, slated for development which many in the local community oppose. Police violently and forcibly removed the flower vendors, and also surrounded a building where leaders from the People's Front in Defense of the Land from the neighbouring community of Atenco were meeting. Atenco is known for its longstanding resistance to the government over corporate development on its lands. In 2002 they forced the government to back away from an international airport development on their lands, and they continue to resist this proposal.

When the police began their attacks on the flower merchants in Texcoco, and isolated Atenco resistance movement leaders, an appeal was sent up the highway so to speak, asking the residents of Atenco to block the highway in order to prevent the expected onslaught of more police. The people of Atenco united and blocked the highway. Five hundred state police confronted 300 or so Atenco residents and their supporters, among them university students, who managed to drive away the initial police raid. Several police were severely beaten, fourteen were taken hostage and later released to the Red Cross. But eventually, by the following day state and federal police, now numbering 2000, had occupied Atenco, and then the real terror began. They went from house to house and rounded up people, including those uninvolved locals who simply took people into their houses to protect them from the violence.

People were severely beaten, intimidated and tortured. Thirty of 47 women arrested have reported sexual assault by police, who they report came with condoms in their pockets and a clear intent to rape. Journalists, both foreign and national, were targeted for beating and arrest, and their recording devices were confiscated. The leadership of the Atenco resistance movement has been arrested; the top leader's family continues to be terrorised; their house has been destroyed. Three police officers who participated in the raids have confirmed that a fourteen year-old boy was killed by a gunshot wound fired by police. A university student activist initially in a coma with severe head

injuries from an exploded tear gas canister lobbed by police has died. Five foreign nationals, including a Chilean documentary maker and student at a Mexico City film school, and a German documentary maker, were deported following their brutal arrests and have been banned from re-entry to Mexico for five years. Around 200 people were arrested, about 100 remain in custody without charge, and others still have been disappeared. Bail is unaffordable for most.

These events have sparked an international campaign of solidarity with the Atenco prisoners and people.

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## **P.S.**

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<http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/bullet024.html>

\* Translated by María Vinós.

\* R. Aída Hernández Castillo is at the Center for High Studies in Social Anthropology (CIESAS), Mexico City, and is author of *Histories and Stories from Chiapas: Border Identities in Southern Mexico* and *Mayan Lives, Mayan Utopias: The Indigenous Peoples of Chiapas*.

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## **Footnotes**

[1] See [www.edomexico.gob.mx/portalgem/legistel/LyEFra.asp](http://www.edomexico.gob.mx/portalgem/legistel/LyEFra.asp)