“We are not Looking for Bones, but Hunting for Treasures” – V National Brigade in Search of Disappeared Persons in Veracruz, Mexico.

There are in Mexico, at present, a large number of social struggles which are emblematic of the history of our country and which have always been with us. The subjects of these resistance processes are: family members of persons murdered or disappeared in the last ten years, who are striving to find truth, justice, reparation and non-repetition; women – especially the young generations—who are endeavoring to put a stop to gender-related violence and murders of women in all possible venues, especially now in intermediate and upper education establishments; indigenous and peasant peoples, who are struggling to defend their territories, cultures and natural resources against national and transnational megaprojects, as well as some who are trying to build community security models, in the face of the extreme violence and total impunity of organized crime, with the connivance of governments of all levels.

In recent weeks, we have witnessed two social events which are, at once, emblematic and tragic, as they symbolize the “selective extermination” of those who participate in these social struggles: the murder of two defenders of the Monarch butterfly sanctuaries in the state of Michoacan (Ocampo County) against illegal felling of trees. Homero Gomez and Raul Hernandez appeared “dead in suspicious circumstances… in a highly obscure situation”, according to Unesco. Homero disappeared on January 14, and was found dead on January 29; the body of Raul was located on February 3.

Around the same time, in the neighboring state of Guerrero, ten members of Sensacion, a popular musical group, were ambushed, slaughtered and burned in Chilapa County. The Community Police of the Regional Coordination of Community Authorities (CRAC in Spanish) imputed the crime to the Ardillos cartel –allied with local mayors and representatives—which has been at loggerheads with the CRAC for years in its efforts to establish organized crime in the region.

Alfonso Durazo, secretary of state for Security and Protection of Citizens, declared on January 23: “The responsibility for public safety rests with the State”. But here we have evidence that the State has neither the strength nor the information needed to accomplish this mission, and that—as the described cases show—some of its members are allied with the criminals. Consequently, if communities and civil society organize to stop such violence and pillage, they can be exterminated with total impunity. In Chilapa and Ocampo counties, and in their respective states, it is well known who the criminals are, as well as their political and business allies. Why are they not stopped and enjailed?

We have 61,637 disappeared persons registered in Mexico, most of whom (97%) disappeared between 2006 and the present. In the current six year (presidential) period, there have been 5,184 disappearances, so that, far from decreasing, the drama grows. These are official figures provided by the undersecretary for Human Rights, Population and Migration, Alejandro Encinas, a man with a history of honesty and commitment who—we have no doubt—is working with other authorities and the President to improve the situation, but it is not enough.
Brigades: Non-cooperation and Disobedience in the face of inhumanity

Reacting to this growing and unstoppable drama of national “mass extermination”, relatives and friends of disappeared and murdered persons have opted years ago—as the CRAC has done in community security—to take matters into their own hands and undertake what the State cannot or will not do, on account of its connivance with crime.

Their principal action has been the organization of search brigades for disappeared persons, either alive or in clandestine graves but, as the Sinaloa State Trackers say: “We are not looking for bones, but hunting treasures”. Within the culture of nonviolence, these brigades would be classed as “non-cooperation acts”, in the sense that relatives and friends seize their responsibility and “interpose their own bodies” in the field of conflict, without waiting for something they know will not happen: action on the part of the State.

Why non-cooperation? Because the expected cooperation would be to do nothing, “looking up” to the authorities, hoping that—by some magical or messianic mechanism—they will do something which they do not want to do, due to complicity or incompetency.

From the point of view of nonviolent struggle, it is a form of “due disobedience to any inhuman order” (J.C. Marin). Which would be the inhuman order they would be disobeying? The injunction to remain paralyzed pleading for help from authorities in the search and identification of their loved ones, something they know will not happen. At the same time, disobedience in the face of that inhuman order generates work and cooperation among the relatives; they have to “operate” together—act and reflect collectively to carry their struggle forward. It is also true that interacting with certain authorities—at different levels of government—creates other forms of cooperation which are indispensable and vital for the brigades.

Thus, a search brigade is a nonviolent action of non-cooperation with a certain sector of authority and the criminals, and of cooperation with the family members, civilian society, and other sectors of authority.

Returning to recent information provided by Encinas, 873 graves have been found, and 1,124 bodies have been exhumed, along with thousands of remains of all types. The principal discoveries have been achieved in the states of Veracruz, Jalisco, Guerrero, Colima, Nayarit, Sinaloa, Sonora and Chihuahua. Almost every week new graves have been found, with constantly more impressive numbers of bodies, in what bishop of Saltillo, Raul Vera, described as a “national churchyard”. These mothers, fathers, relatives and friends are undertaking a heroic social enterprise, exhibiting great bravery, as the risks are very high, as has been abundantly demonstrated by the many threats, ambushes and direct attacks by criminals against the search collectives in various states.

But the relatives not only have to face a high risk of death, but also rejection, impunity and attack by authorities. What has just happened in the state of Morelos is inconceivable in terms of inhumanity: The General Prosecutor’s office, on January 16, delivered a body to Felicitas Tijera Carvajal, under the assumption that it was the remains of her son, Jonathan Martinez Tijera; she organized a wake and buried the remains resorting to borrowed money. However, on February 1, Felicitas discovered that her son was alive, living in a shelter. Can we imagine a greater instance of moral damage and sadism against a person? Are the authorities responsible still at their desks?
The V National Search Brigade for Missing Persons (BNBD in Spanish), organized by the National Links Network, is working in the state of Veracruz between February 7 and February 22, in the region encompassing Poza Rica and Papantla; in his initial press conference, organizer Juan Carlos Trujillo declared: “The dimension of evil in the north of Veracruz defies imagination”. Lucia de los Angeles Diaz, from the Solecito Veracruz collective, claimed a year ago that there could be as many as 20,000 disappeared persons in that state, the majority of whom were young people between the ages of 14 and 25 years old (La Jornada, 2-2-19). In the meantime, the state commissioner for the Search for Missing Personas, Brenda Ceron, confirmed recently that “…The north of the state of Veracruz is where the greatest number of missing persons are registered”. (Vanguardia, 23-12-19)

In each of the two weeks during which the Brigade undertakes its searches, about three hundred people participate, most of them relatives of disappeared persons. It is a great collective undertaking—which starts months before, and ends months after the search itself—comprising above all the solidarity of civil society, and the self-organization of the relatives, with a certain degree of support from authorities at all levels; in the case of Veracruz we can vouch for, among others, the commitment of the Bureau for Peace and Human Rights, and some sectors of the Veracruzan University. This will be the largest Brigade organized to date, but its relevance is not only quantitative, but also qualitative, because it is the fruit of an annual process of developing awareness of the needs, obstacles and forms of struggle of the different collectives in the rest of the country; of the strategic importance of articulating networks, for enhancing security, efficiency, and greater socio-political pressure, vital for building a more complex knowledge of how to achieve the objectives of the struggle; all this also generates solidarity and loving association which provides much strength for sustaining the quest.

73 collectives from 27 states are participating in the National Links Network. The Intervention Axes will be: search for living persons (in hospitals and jails), and bodies in the field (clandestine graves); identification and forensic follow-up; in terms of education -both religious and social- promotion of awareness, conscience and reconstruction of the social weave will be undertaken in schools, religious venues, streets and parks. This Brigade incorporates the axis of Forensic Identification and Follow-up which, we feel, is fundamental as a starting point for really resolving the great social and family dramas triggered by this war of extermination, as there is a great chasm between the amount of search operations and the number of “treasures” unearthed, apart from the fact that the ratio of identifications is minimal. This generates a double anguish and victimization, because some “treasures” have appeared, but nobody knows to whom they belong.

National Campaigns to intensify Identification and get to know “the way, the truth, and life” in the Searches

A strategic field in this new phase of struggle, is how to –starting with civilian society and the relatives of disappeared persons—build alternative civilian forms (alongside the official ones) for identification of bodies, and how to exert pressure on the authorities to induce them to shoulder this responsibility with greater determination, speed, and investment of human and material resources. It is not a valid excuse, in the face of
inhumanity on a scale such as that observed in our country, to claim that inaction is due to lack of human resources and money; authorities have the mandate to provide both. We are not promoting any systems independent from the State to carry out these chores—which, for various reasons, would be unmanageable—but to explore forms of complementation and pressure by “auxiliary forces”. There are historic experiences that show the possibility of advancing along this line.

To develop these structures and infrastructures capable of accelerating forensic and genetic identification work, in other words, definitely resolving the worst human drama we endure in this country, it is also fundamental to increase economic and human resources; it is at this point where part of the national “moral reserve”—churches and universities, for example—should do much more in terms of economic solidarity and specialized personnel. In this sense, for example, the Mexican National Autonomous University (UNAM) is pushing the NN Identification Project and the Voice Bank for the prevention of crime; the Spanish-Mexican University of the jesuits (UIA in Spanish) has a program for the investigation of clandestine graves; the Autonomous University of the State of Morelos (UAEM) participated actively in the process of searching and opening clandestine graves in the counties of Tetelcingo and Jojutla. Surely, there must be some other experiences in universities around the country, but they are still too few when measured against the magnitude of the tragedy.

Concerning this Brigade, in the matter of searching in the field—in which some local churches of various denominations and their hierarchies have exhibited solidarity with the families—it would be very interesting to set in motion some type of exemplary Campaign of Searching for Graves, which could be extended later to a national level. Christ said: “I am the way, the truth, and life” (John 14, 6), and I can hardly think of a better occasion than this to make these words come alive in our own actions. Anonymously (for example, letter boxes in churches, community centers, schools), we could send information to family members concerning the direction (“the way”) in which they might find clandestine graves, thus expressing “the truth” without mentioning names, which will enable the families to recover their “life”, as opposed to simply “surviving” with their tragedy. Churches of all denominations—and, evidently, other social venues too—possess the capacity and moral strength to call for local and/or national campaigns for “The way, the truth, and life”, establishing themselves as very real auxiliary forces for the construction of justice and peace in Mexico.

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